

WHEN IS A CHRISTIAN NOT A CHRISTIAN?

Some have never got hold of the truth of justification by faith. There are those who think that they are more acceptable to God when they have a quiet time, and not quite so acceptable when they miss a quiet time.

Some of you are here because you know that where there is a good bank-note there are going to be counterfeits. Wherever a good currency exists forgeries exist. You want to make sure that yours is not a counterfeit religious experience and you are in earnest about that. Some of you have assurance problems, and others have had bad experiences: people you know have fallen away and they even tell you that they 'feel free' without any profession or concern about Jesus Christ.

So when is a Christian not a Christian?

1. SOME PEOPLE ARE NOT SURE THEY ARE CHRISTIANS WHEN THEY REALLY ARE.

How could such a thing happen?

[i] Because of the preaching that goes on in certain churches and the conversations and ideas that follow the preaching. In many professing churches the idea that you can be sure you are saved is regarded with a bit of suspicion. "You are being too cocksure," people will say to a Christian. They call it assurance presumption.

In the NT we have troubles, agonising over their sins, opposition, and ups and downs all of which is typical of NT Christians. But they did not doubt their salvation. See the confidence of Romans 5:1ff. ". . . we have peace with God," and Galatians 2:20 ". . . who loved me and gave himself for me." It is the language of certainty. Or 2 Timothy 4:7 "I have fought the good fight . . . henceforth there is laid up for me the crown . . ." Or I John 3:14 "We know that we have passed from death to life. . . ." When people claim that only very few can ever know that they are Christians then that notion is to be trampled on.

[ii] Some have never got hold of the truth of justification by faith. There are those who think that they are more acceptable to God when they have a quiet time, and not quite so acceptable when they miss a quiet time. But this morning when you woke up you were one with God because of the finished perfect work of God in Christ and his righteousness is yours now by imputation. "Sin boldly," said Luther. In other words, you are a sinner listening to this message, and I am a sinner in preaching it, but don't let it rob you of your peace because there is the mighty Saviour.

[iii] Some have heard testimonies of a certain dramatic kind. My soldier father was awakened by a sergeant who rapped loudly on the tin locker. But my mother did not wake me up like that. She woke me with a cup of tea. People are woken up in different ways. Some flowers are opened gently with the morning sun. Lydia was like this. While in the same 16th chapter of the Acts the jailer was awakened by an earthquake. All our testimonies are different. Some cannot remember the year they were converted, or when they even began to trust in the Lord Jesus.

[iv] Some mix up faith with strong faith. In our Prayer Meetings there are those who can bring heaven near. But others cannot pray like that. Some lives are full of faith and purity and maturity, while you feel as you consider them that you are not in the same league. But you are mixing up spiritual life with spiritual maturity. In Romans 4:5 we are helpfully told that God justifies the ungodly who believe in him.

2. SOME PEOPLE ARE SURE THEY ARE CHRISTIANS WHEN THEY REALLY ARE NOT.

All the books in the NT tend to tell us that. Some have made a profession of faith and that is why they think they are Christians. Matthew 7:21 brings us Jesus' words, "Not everyone who says to me Lord Lord will enter the kingdom of God." At the beginning of 2 Corinthians 1:1ff 'all the saints' are referred to as recipients of this letter, but in 13:5 Paul tells them all to examine themselves whether they are in the faith. Some are sure, but they are self-deceived. They are wrong about the evidences.

In Matthew 7:21 we are warned of 'many' being deceived. They were spiritually gifted but not every genuine experience of the Holy Spirit is a saving experience. Was Judas spiritually gifted? Who gifted him? Did Judas cast out demons? It did not follow that he was saved. If men preach and some are converted it does not mean that the preachers are certainly saved.

Some people are sure they are converted (but they are not) and the reason for their assurance is that they believe this Book. But the demons also believe this Book and can quote from it. There are those who say that when they read the Bible parts of it just leap out and grab them, and because of this they feel they are Christians. They are getting assurance not from the Bible's meaning but their own phenomenal experience as they read it.

Some people are sure they are Christians because they are convinced of their sin. Sometimes non-Christians have more conviction of sin than believers. That is not surprising. False Christians may have depths of depression and suicide but go into a comfortless eternity. In Philippians 3:7 Paul says that what things were gain to him he counted loss for Christ. He is so enraptured with Christ that the world has nothing to offer him. But disgust with the world alone is not evidence you are a Christian.

3. YOU CAN KNOW FOR CERTAIN WHETHER YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN OR NOT.

I look at the Scripture and then I look at myself. Is the picture of a Christian in the Bible a picture of me? The picture of a Christian in the Bible contains such features as these:

[i] He has faith in Jesus Christ. You know if you have faith. You know whether you know the gospel and whether you trust in Christ. You do not need anything outside the Bible. You know whether you trust Jesus only or not. People come to us and tell us that they believe they are Christians. We probe them and then we ask whether God would listen to this person. They say to you that they believe they are saved for these reasons: "I am needy, I love Christians, and I love the Bible." If that is the sum total of their grounds for acceptance by God they are trusting in themselves. But another will say that if it were not for the Lord Jesus Christ he would have no hope. You have more confidence in such a man. You say to him, "So you pray? Why should a holy God listen to you?" "Because of Him!" he replies promptly. That is Christian language.

[ii] Again, Christians have a certain attitude to sin. They grow in sensitivity in certain areas. Their heart is repulsed by all that is ungodly.

[iii] Again a true Christian will love the brethren and serve them. You defend the reputation of Christians and forgive them. You have been truly wronged by another brother but you offer him forgiveness: "He meant to do it, but I have forgiven him." In the Lord's Prayer the Lord Jesus tells us that we forgive our debtors and have hope that God will forgive us. It is not conceivable that those who've gone to the cross of Christ for mercy should nurse grudges against those who are fellow Christians.

[iv] In Romans 8:16 we are told of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God. So how does that fit in with self-examination? Who wrote the Book? The Holy Spirit wrote it. Would he by-pass it? Would he give you assurance and simply ignore the book he has inspired? So we look at ourselves in the light of the Bible, and what the Scriptures say about Christians we discover is true of what we believe and how we would act.

So I become convinced that I am a child of God through word and Spirit combined together and that is what sustains my assurance throughout my life. The more I am exposed to the Word the more I am sure that I am a Christian and the less I am exposed the less assured that I am a Christian.

[Preached by Stuart Olyott at a seminar at the Evangelical Movement of Wales Conference in Aberystwyth 2002 on the subject of assurance entitling this subject, "When is a Christian not a Christian?". The seminar ended with a question session from the 300 in the congregation.]

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