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What Makes a 'Christian'?

The varieties of Christian belief suggest that 'anything goes'. How do you define a 'Christian'?
by James McBride

Around one third of the world's population classify themselves as 'Christian' - about two billion. They range from near voodoo groups through Baptists, Mormon, Scientology, Methodists, Sabbatarian to High Church Anglican and Roman Catholic. There's a kaleidoscope of beliefs.

For many (and perhaps most), the Christian label is accepted by reason of birth—with little commitment to the principles of the faith, and no 'searching of the Scriptures' to find evidence for what they believe.

The apostle Paul gives us a definition: "*without the Spirit of Christ you are none of his*". To be a true Christian means you must have God's Spirit. *What is that?* If you do have that Spirit what effect does it have on your behavior?

Surely one assumption would be that—with perhaps some unimportant variation—the Spirit would bring everyone to the same general pattern of belief. Indeed Jesus himself tells us "*the Spirit will guide you into all truth*". From this we could also assume that those who have the Spirit of Christ for a longish time will converge in their understanding of the core teachings of Scripture. After all, the God 'who changes not', who is "*the same yesterday, today and forever*" was quite adamant that we "*tremble at his Word*".

Although there remain some '*hard things to understand*' in the Scriptures concerning which there can—and should—be open discussion, yet the core teachings of the Word of God are abundantly clear. Sadly, this doesn't stop some folk going off the doctrinal rails. There have always been false teachers, there are now and there always will be in this era.

And not least in the matter of 'who is a Christian'.

Externals

The true faith is like a dwelling. The 'walls' are the protective framework for the inner furnishings. That essential framework, for the Christian, is the pattern, the blueprint, for how and when the Creator requires His children to approach Him. In essence, He hasn't changed on this since time began. His teachings are '*the same yesterday and tomorrow*'. He warns us not to add to or take away from His eternal teachings.

God is carefully selecting who enters the dwelling. The framework identifies Him, and His plan for them. To be given the door key, says the apostle Peter, each must '*repent and be immersed and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit*'. He adds that God gives His Spirit to "*...those who obey him*".

Unless your public life is one of submission to God in observing His identifying sign—the weekly and annual holy days—then self-examination regarding your conversion is vital. The first Christians were aware of this. During the first century of Christianity they faithfully continued the pattern of life followed by the people of God through time, and by Jesus and the apostles. Indeed they were seen by the authorities as a sect of Judaism. Only later did their successors begin the observance of the days imported from the non-Biblical religions—such as Christmas and Easter.

From House to Home

However, walls are not enough. No-one wants to live in an empty house devoid of furnishings. As the teachings of Jesus emphasize, outward observance of the Law of God isn't enough. And as Benjamin

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Franklin reportedly said: "A house is not a home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as the body". Once you 'enter the house'—*ie*, approach God as He has prescribed—you then set about to furnish it with divine character.

God's way is different. It transforms every aspect of daily life—and not least the human spirit. The heart of the Christian faith is 'love'. The Scriptures encourage us to '*love God*' (primarily) and to '*love neighbour*'. But do we have the right definition of 'love' ?

'Love' defined

Love, usually, is seen as a mushy sentimental attachment to something—chocolate, maybe, or sport. It's a sentiment that can readily be cast aside to be replaced by a 'new love'. Relationships based on it are just as easily discarded—as witnessed by the volume of divorces and other broken relationships. Even, sadly, among Christians.

In fact, the definition of true Christian love is simple—but difficult for morally weak humanity to implement. It applies in the secular and in the religious life.

Simply, love is *total commitment—materially, emotionally, spiritually*. That's the meaning of *agape*. That is at the heart of the Christian faith. Total commitment both to, in the first place, God, and then to neighbour, defined as anyone we encounter who needs our help. That, said Jesus, is what is required for eternal life. The indwelling Spirit of God in the Christian enables it.

What normally passes for '*Christian love*' is construed, usually, as 'doing good' - though this is shared by devotees of all faiths. But the apostle Paul—in the 'love chapter', I Corinthians 13—scuppered the notion that *agape* love is equated with simply doing 'good works'. Not even martyrdom, he says, or feeding the poor, is 'good' without this kind of total commitment. For Christians, 'good works' stems from and accompanies this kind of love.

It's the same in personal relationships. Romantic love is important, but it isn't *agape*. Love for a husband or wife, whether among church brethren or in the secular world, demands total lifetime commitment—'*for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death parts*'. Failure to recognize this results in our spiraling divorce rate, unhappy relationships and dysfunctional family life.

To be recognized by the Creator and our Saviour as a true Christian, then, there has to be a life-change. Enter His 'dwelling' as He has prescribed from the beginning. And furnish it with true love.

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