

**AM I TRULY A CHRISTIAN: THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION
I CAN ASK AS A MEMBER OF THIS CHURCH
(AND WAYS TO KNOW I AM)**

Rev. Lawrence Baldrige
July 14, 2008

I have been thinking about the most important question that I can ask as a member of this church, and I think it is this: Am I truly a Christian? There are many other important questions, of course, but this is the most important. We need to know if we are really Christians, or if we are just playing the game that many church members play. Some churches ask about our orthodoxy. They wonder how we stand on Christian doctrine, which is surely essential, but not most essential. They want to know if we believe the Bible is the Word of God; and of course we do, but that is not the most important question. Others want to know our view on the Lord's Supper and on Baptism, and while these issues are important, they are not of ultimate importance. Still others question our views of church membership and of worship and of leadership style, and so on. But the question each of us should ask is not these things. It is a very personal question that I alone can answer. It is this: Am I truly a Christian?

I remember our dear friend and founder June Buchanan saying to me one day, "Our nation is a Christian nation; and I believe we are all Christians." I certainly admired her inclusiveness, but I obviously disagreed completely. To be called Christian is not to be a Christian. To live in a Christian nation is not to be a Christian because our nation is called that. When I grew up, one of the stalwarts of our community was a Church of Christ preacher; and I remember in a discussion with him that he said, "All Baptists are going to Hell." He added, "If you are not a member of the Church of Christ you are not a Christian." He was speaking for himself, of course, not for his denomination. I have heard Baptists say pretty much the same thing: "If you're not a member of this church you are going to Hell." Maybe they couched their language in more acceptable terms, but that was what they were really saying.

Let me put it somewhat differently: No one is a Christian because he or she was baptized, sprinkled, confirmed, or otherwise initiated into an institution that is supposedly a Christian institution, whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or some other group or sect. One may be in one of these institutions and be a Christian, but the membership, as such, doesn't make one a Christian.

This brings up the whole question of what makes one a Christian. I take the Scriptural and the experiential view that being a real Christian means more than just belonging to an organization, however good that institution. Being a real Christian means we are Christian by Conversion, by Relationship, and by Separation.

I. The first question I must ask myself regards the Conversion aspect: Have I had a life-changing experience that resulted in a newness of life? The experience itself differs with different people. In the New Testament, the Pharisee Saul was almost forcibly converted from a snarling fanatic to a humble Paul the Proclaimer. Lydia, however, the 'seller of purple' had a quiet 'heart-opening' experience when Christ entered her life. Like Paul, the Philippian Jailer was brought into the faith with the drama of an earthquake that shook loose all the chains of the prisoners. The Ethiopian Eunuch, on the other hand,

came along slowly, reading the word, and listening to a preacher called Phillip. Whatever method by which you came into the faith doesn't really matter. But you must have been converted into the faith. Conversion is not a natural process; it is supernatural. In that dramatic scene in the 3rd chapter of John, Jesus told Nicodemus that *he must be born again*. Obviously Nicodemus questioned the meaning of the rebirth. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born from above. Then Jesus explained the new birth by comparing the physical and the spiritual births—the first is of water that brings the baby gushing into the world; the second birth is spiritual that brings a new spirit entering the old man and coming into the world. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” reminds Jesus; “and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” What Jesus said was as revolutionary as anything ever spoken. He said that anyone who followed Him must have a second birth, a real birth, that came directly from the supernatural source of Heaven itself. In Galatians 6:15, Paul reminded the people, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a **new creation**.”

In 2 Cor. 5:17, he wrote, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ. He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” In Titus 3:5, Paul writes, “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy, He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

Have you asked that question of yourself? Let me repeat it again: Have I had a life-changing experience that resulted in a newness of life? If you have not had that special moment in your life when the Spirit of God entered your heart and you knew that God was your Father, then, ‘you must be born again.’ I urge you to ask that question. If nothing has happened in your life that has resulted in a new life within, then that life is available to you. You must be sorry for your sin and invite Jesus to come into your heart. Life can start anew with God's Newness.

II. Naturally the child starts having fellowship with its parents the moment it is born. So, the next question we must ask is, Do I truly love God as my Heavenly Father and Jesus as my Savior and Lord? In the same way, we begin fellowship with God only when the Holy Spirit enters our heart. Paul reminds us, Rom 8:15, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*”¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

This is the relational or the fellowship aspect of being a Christian. I am a Christian if God is my Father and Jesus Christ is my savior, and I know this in my life of fellowship. Here we have something of a problem, however. It is so easy to praise God the Father, and to say Glory to God in the Highest. It is easy to tell others how much we love Jesus. We can so easily say these words and be following the same prophecy that Jesus repeated when he said, “This people praise me with their mouths but their hearts are far from me.” Jesus told us exactly how we should love Him. He said in John 14: 21, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and **show myself to him.**”

We cannot love God and do what always displeases Him. Show me a person who breaks the commandments of God regularly while saying he loves God, and I will show you a hypocrite. Our Love for God is a relationship steeped in Love which is obedient to the commands of the heavenly Father.

Again there is a second question that we must ask in our Love of God: We know that we know Him if we keep His commandments. But again we must ask the question, do I love my fellow human beings? When Jesus was confronted with what was the greatest commandment He answered, Mt. 22: 36, “Teacher, which is the **greatest commandment** in the Law?”

III. The 3rd question that determines whether or not I am truly a Christian concerns my love for others. So we must ask the question, Do I love my neighbors the way Jesus said to love them? In MT 22:37, Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the first and **greatest commandment**.³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ To love the neighbor is to help the neighbor; to love the neighbor is to pray for the neighbor. This is both relational and social. In answering another critic, Jesus told the story of The Good Samaritan. The implication was that anyone in need is my neighbor, and that anyone who helps those in need is my neighbor, and that I should love them all.

I was speaking in a Romanian village, sitting among the elders, men my age, and telling them that Jesus loved everyone, gypsy and Romanian alike; and that we should love human beings the same way. We had great fellowship as we spoke, and one of the elders said something very wise. He said: “When you see a man coming in the distance you say, ‘There comes a man.’ And when he comes up to you, you say, ‘He is a gypsy.’ Then when you see him going in the distance, you say, ‘There goes a man.’ ”

He was emphasizing the humanity of every man. A wise man indeed. Do not be blinded by a man’s social standing or by his color, for as Browning said, ‘a man is a man for all that’. Every human being bears within his being the ‘Image of the Invisible God.’ And every man has fallen and smashed and destroyed that Image, but the vestiges of that image are always there. Man walks upright and looks up to God. I cannot and will not put a white man above a black man. I will not and cannot put a poor man below a rich man. I look into the mirror and I see myself, but I also see ‘everyman’. I look into the mirror and I see that fallen creature who bears the very Image of Jesus Christ, who was Himself the complete Image of God among men. I must tip my hat to all men for we are all in the image of God. And when I say man, I mean female equal in every respect to male. Do I Love other human beings because they are created in God’s Image?

IV. Again, I must ask another question that Relates to the Kingdom: Do I Love my Christian brothers and sisters? If I do not love other Christians I am not truly a Christian. JN 13:34: “A new command I give you: **Love one another**. As I have loved you, so you must **love one another**.³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you **love one another**.” This command to love other disciples is found in other places as well. 1JN 4:7: Dear friends, let us **love one another**, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.⁹

The Apostle Peter says the same thing, 1PE 1:22, Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, **love one another** deeply, from the heart.

And here is the clincher in 1 Jn. 3:14. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” In

other words, if we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we know that we are Christians. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” John also said that if we did not love our fellow Christians, we were abiding in death, meaning that we were still unsaved. Do I Love my Christian brothers and sisters?

V. The last question that will help me to know if I am a Christian or not relates to the Separation aspect of my life as a believer. It is this: Am I chastized for my sin? And do I speedily seek forgiveness? One of the most interesting things in my walk with God has been the way the Holy Spirit has ‘whipped’ me back into shape in my Christian life. For the overly sensitive souls, I do not mean ‘whipped’ literally, but spiritually. The Bible says it best:

Heb 12:5 My son, do not make light of the Lord's **discipline**, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

HEB 12:6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

HEB 12:7 Endure hardship as **discipline**; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes **discipline**), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.

The question then is this: Am I chastised for my sin? Does it really hurt when I do wrong? Here is what the Bible says, speaking of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, starting in Jn.16:8 “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:⁹ in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;¹⁰ in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer;¹¹ and in regard to judgment, because the **prince** of this world now stands condemned.” The convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit occurs every time the Christian sins. God hates our sin. The world is caught in the throes of sin, but we are to be separate from the world. Because of that the Holy Spirit reminds us again and again that we are holy unto the Lord, and must live as best we can lives of blameless character. One cannot be a Christian and enjoy sinning. If you enjoy your sin without any consequence of the Spirit's conviction and discipline, you are not God's child—you have never been born again.

One final thought, in the separation aspect of our lives we must remember that the world is doing exactly what God expects of it. The contemporary sins are not contemporary or new. The new morality is simply a replaying of the old immorality. Man's lust is as old as Adam; man's selfishness as old as Cain. But the Christian is separated from the world by the Holy Spirit, and thus, when we sin, we, if we truly are Christians, we will rush back to God and cry out ‘Father, forgive me, I have sinned against you.’ And 1JN 1:8 “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” We rush as soon as possible back to the ‘waiting Father’ and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness.⁷ But if we

walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.