

Section One

Being Sure About Your Relationship with God

In Section One...

You will be discussing the importance of knowing for sure that you are a Christian. There are plenty of misconceptions out there about what God requires to be right with him, so whether you have been a Christian for a long time or a short time you can look forward to digging into what God's word has to say about biblical Christianity.

As You Go Through Section One...

- >Read section 1 carefully.
- >Fill in the questions for chapter 1.
- >Be ready to discuss your testimony.
- >Memorize 2 Corinthians 5:17 by your next meeting.

**“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ,
he is a new creation; the old has gone,
the new has come!”**

-2 Corinthians 5:17

Chapter 1: What is a Christian?

The concern over being “right with God” is as old as the third chapter of the Bible. Ever since Adam and Eve’s first rebellious act in the Garden of Eden men and women have been faced with the problem of a severed relationship with their Creator. People with sin on their record can’t create nor maintain a relationship with a holy and sinless God. For centuries people have tried, and they still do, but by themselves imperfect people just don’t have a chance.

The good news is that Jesus came to solve the problem (that’s even what the word “gospel” actually means)! What he did made all the difference in the world for people wanting to be right with their Maker. Unfortunately, too many people don’t understand what the good news is all about. They struggle through life hoping that their good deeds will outweigh their bad deeds – as though God will simply overlook their sin and embrace a 65% righteous person.

Being “right with God” is certainly not defined by doing more good than bad. Jesus made that clear in his promise to a dying thief. Doing good things may be an important part of living the Christian life but if one wants to be “right with God” it all comes down to a question of one’s relationship to Jesus Christ. Heaven and hell will ultimately be about who really “knows” Jesus and who does not.

Most People

Though there are always some who admit to being on God’s bad list, most people believe that they are “right with God.” They may be counting on a divine sliding scale, or some religious ritual, but whatever their reason, most people think that come judgment day they’ll probably come out on top. Unfortunately, that is not what the Bible says. Read *Matthew 7:13-14*. What does this passage have to say about how many really do inherit God’s blessing after their death?

Read a few verses further in *Matthew 7:22-23* where those standing before Jesus present their case. Though they seem certain about their right standing before God, Jesus tells them to depart from him because in reality “he never knew them” and they still had sin on their record. What is your reaction to Jesus’ prediction of so many deceived people on judgment day? With so much deception and so much on the line, it is critically important that we look to the Bible to discover just exactly *what a Christian is, how a person becomes a Christian, and how we will know when we are a Christian.*

With Your Partner...

Discuss the deception that is depicted in Matthew 7. Do you think that you are, or ever have been, deceived about the reality of your “right standing” before God?

What is a Christian?

Remember... *Whenever a concept or a Bible verse is confusing to you be sure to bring it up for discussion with your partner.*

The word “Christian” was not often used in the Bible (actually only three times) and yet it was the label that caught on to refer to someone who is closely aligned with Jesus Christ. That may mean different things to different people today, but when the term was coined a person who was closely aligned with Jesus was someone who truly “knew” him and was “known by him” (remember the words of Jesus in *Matthew 7:23*).

This is obviously more than just knowing *about* Jesus. Really knowing Jesus implies a relationship with him – a good relationship. Notice how Jesus described it.

John 10:14-15a

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”

John 8:19b

Jesus replied. “If you knew me, you would know my Father also.”

Jesus compares his relationship with his people to his relationship with God the Father. It is clear then that to “know Jesus” is to have a real and vital relationship with Jesus. But it doesn’t stop there.

If one has a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, he or she also has a real and vital relationship with God the Father. The sin problem that severed our relationship with our Creator has been solved for those who “know Christ.” (More on that later!)

A Christian is Someone Who is Acceptable to God

Christians then, are those people who through Christ have had their sins forgiven and have been made acceptable before a perfect and sinless God. Christians are imperfect people made perfect in God’s sight through their alignment with Jesus Christ!

Romans 8:1

“there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”

Acts 13:38

“My brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you”

How does it make you feel to know that as a Christian you can be completely, 100% acceptable before God?

A Christian is Someone Who Follows Christ

One of the most popular words in the New Testament for one aligned with Jesus Christ is the word “disciple.” The word “disciple” is a descriptive term for one who follows the teachings of his master and seeks to emulate the lifestyle of his master. In the Bible those who had been made right with God through their faith in Christ sought to follow Christ. Though a Christian’s following of Christ and his teachings is never consistently perfect, the New Testament speaks volumes about this being a clear indication of those who know Christ and those who don’t.

Read 1 *John* 3:1-10 and summarize what is being said in that passage.

A Christian is Someone Who Has Been Adopted by God

First *John* 3:1 reminds us of another popular biblical phrase used to describe Christians, namely “the Children of God.” This title emphasizes the strong legal bond that exists between God and his people. With their sins forgiven and their lives made acceptable to him through the work of Christ, Christians are brought into a close and permanent relationship with God as his adopted children. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is described in *Ephesians* 1:5, 13-14 as the pledge of God’s adoption.

Ponder the power of this concept for a moment. God, our infinitely wise Creator, has chosen to embrace Christians not just as subjects in his kingdom but as sons and daughters in his family!

Romans 8:15b

...you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.”

A Christian is Someone Who is Closely Identified with Other Christians

The most frequently used term in the New Testament for those aligned with Christ is “brothers.” This may come as a surprise considering that it speaks of our relationship with each other instead of our relationship with God. Jesus obviously wanted us to realize that Christianity was not to be as “personal” as our generation has wanted to make it.

Christians are called to find an identity together. Assembled groups of Christians are called the body of Christ, a temple of God, a household of faith, and a flock of followers, just to name a few. The love, unity, togetherness, and mutual respect of Christians for one another should be one of our distinguishing marks.

John 13:35

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

This brief overview of what a Christian is should quickly reveal that one cannot be “sort of a Christian.” There must be a point in one’s life when one becomes a Christian. Though one can consider Christianity and learn tons about it from the inside of a church (possibly for years), a person is either a Christian or not a Christian. There is no middle ground. In the following chapters we will look at how one becomes a Christian.

With Your Partner...

Discuss some popular misconceptions about what a Christian is.

Chapter 2: How Do I Become a Christian?

To be sure about our relationship with God we must be certain that we are clear about what the Bible says a person must do to become a Christian.

With Your Partner...

Look together at Acts 17:22-34 as one example of the gospel message being presented to non-Christians. Attempt to locate as many of the elements in this summary outline as possible.

To Become a Christian You Must Understand the Gospel

The New Testament boldly proclaims a message (called “the gospel”) that if rightly understood and rightly responded to makes one a Christian. This is what most of the preaching recorded in the book of Acts is all about. In some of the gospel presentations in the New Testament you will find much time allotted to laying a foundation and giving background, in other instances you will simply find a record of the speaker calling the people to rightly respond to an abbreviated gospel message. In any case, a pattern emerges that gives us a basic outline of the gospel content.

Summary of the Gospel Message

1. The Background

- *God is our Creator*
- *God is Holy*
- *God is Just*
- *God is Loving*

2. The Bad News

- *We are Sinful and Separated from God*
- *We Deserve God's Punishment*

3. The Good News

- *Jesus is God*
- *He Lived and Died as Our Substitute*
- *He Conquered Death for Us*

Remember that this is just the gospel message. It does not spell out the necessary and biblical response (to be discussed later beginning on page 9). Nevertheless, one cannot become a Christian without understanding and embracing the basic message of the gospel. So it is important to look at each element a little closer.

God is our Creator. The background to the gospel message is rooted in the fact that we are created by God. This is so important that we find it in the very first verse of the Bible. Why do you think that this is so essential if one is to properly understand the rest of the gospel message? What are the implications for people if God really is their Creator?

With Your Partner...

Discuss the potential problems if one were to try and understand the gospel without recognizing that God was first their Creator, holy, and just. Why does the gospel begin here and not first with the fact that God is love?

God is holy. This means that God is absolutely perfect. Read *1 Peter 1:15-16* and notice that God's own perfection is to be the standard for all those he has created. This concept of perfection being the only acceptable standard is central in the gospel message!

God is just. God has not left the people he made to do whatever they want without accountability and consequences for their choices. Foundational to the gospel message is the fact that God will one day judge each person, and according to the Bible he will do it with perfect justice. *Job 34:12* says, "It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice." That may sound like a comforting verse if someone has seriously wronged you, but assuming that we by nature have all seriously wronged God (failing to measure up to his standards of perfection) the justice of God leaves us in a precarious position. What does *2 Thessalonians 1:8-9* say about the end result of God's justice for most people?

God is love. Understanding that we are answerable to our Creator, that he requires perfect holiness, and that because he is just he can't bend the rules, should make it overwhelming clear that if there is going to be any "good news" it will have to stem from his love! Thankfully, God *is* loving (1 John 4:8). His love prompted him to provide a solution to our problem of sin and coming judgment.

A person cannot become a Christian unless he first understands something about that problem. We've called this "the bad news." The gospel is good news because it provides answers for people's terrible dilemma.

We are sinful and separated. Many people are slow to admit that they have this problem because they have come to believe that sin is doing something they consider "really bad" or culturally unacceptable. Remember that God, by virtue of his position as our Creator, is the judge of whether something is bad or good. Some things our culture may consider moral may in fact be immoral to God (Luke 16:15). In the Bible sin is defined in two ways. First, it describes doing something God considers wrong (1 John 3:4 – i.e. breaking his standard).

With Your Partner...

Discuss the importance of Jesus being God and any experiences you might have had with those who try to convince people that Jesus is not God.

Secondly, it describes the state of being separated from God (Ephesians 2:1 – i.e. living without a relationship with God). Realize that someone who does not have a relationship with God is considered to be in a state of sin even though they may do many things that are morally acceptable.

How does *Isaiah 59:2* summarize what happened in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned?

By reading Isaiah 59:2 and noting that sin causes separation, one might be led to believe that we become separated from God (enter the state of sin) when we commit our first sinful act. But in reality the Bible teaches that every person since Adam has been born into a state of sin. Comment on the relationship between the state of sin and the acts of sin in *Ephesians 4:18-19*.

We deserve God's punishment. Many people believe that “guilt” is simply a bad feeling we have when we do bad things. In reality, the Bible defines guilt as being responsible for sin. One does not necessarily have to feel guilty to be guilty. According to the Bible all people who live in a state of sin and choose to do sinful things are guilty before a just and holy God. That means that all people are deserving of God's punishment.

Ephesians 2:3

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

When someone becomes convinced of the bad news regarding their situation before God they are ready to hear the greatest news of the gospel message. The great news is all about Jesus Christ!

Jesus is God. This is an essential part of the gospel message in the New Testament (notice that it becomes a test of one's Christian profession in 1 John 4:2-3). Jesus was the expected Messiah that had been foretold in the Old Testament which, if carefully examined, clearly pointed to someone who was more than a mere human (see for instance Micah 5:2; Isaiah 9:6; Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus had to be God for his work on our behalf to be qualitatively and quantitatively adequate to save us. It was “qualitatively divine” in that he lived a perfectly holy life (1 John 3:5; 1 Peter 2:22), and “quantitatively divine” in that his death was applicable for many (Heb.7:27; 9:14). Read *Philippians 2:6-8* and comment on what Jesus went through in becoming a man to accomplish our salvation.

With Your Partner...

Look at Matthew 3:13-15 and discuss Jesus' reason for being baptized and its relationship to his life being a substitute for ours.

Jesus lived and died as our substitute. This is the core of the gospel message. When we thought through God's holiness it became clear that a 65% righteous life won't cut it with a perfect God. He, by the nature of his holiness, requires 100% righteousness and 0% sin. Knowing that all humans are sinful and separated from himself, God the Father sent Jesus to become a man and live a 100% perfect life. This perfect righteousness could then be credited to people who are not.

Not only did Jesus live so that he could give us his righteousness, he died so that he could take on our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, God the Father was exercising his justice against the sinful acts of sinful people by punishing Jesus instead of them. In this way God could credit Christ's account with our sin and leave us with none! Notice carefully how this is stated in the Bible:

2 Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Our Creator demonstrates his incredible love for us by counting Jesus' life and death as a substitution for ours, making us in Christ 100% righteous and 0% sinful, while at the same time maintaining his holiness and justice. This is the heart of the gospel message!

Jesus conquered death for us. The result of all of this is that God is now able to free us from the penalty of our sin which includes both spiritual death (i.e. separation from God) and physical death (i.e. the permanent destruction of our bodies). In taking care of the sin problem Jesus has eliminated for Christians the relational separation that existed between him and us. The intimate relationship with God that Christians enjoy every day is proof that Christ's life and death did the job and bridged the gap!

In taking care of the sin problem Jesus also eliminated the permanence of physical death. This is what his resurrection was all about! While one might claim that the "proof" of a real and intimate relationship with an invisible God is hardly proof, it is difficult to argue with Christ's resurrection! This is God's objective, historical stamp of approval on the substitutionary life and death of Jesus Christ.

Read *1 Corinthians 15:12-28* and comment on how important Jesus' resurrection is in the Bible.

To Become a Christian You Must Rightly Respond to the Gospel

Knowing and accepting the facts of the gospel message is critically important, but it is not enough. God requires that if a person is to become a Christian he or she must respond to the gospel message as directed in the Bible. God calls people to *make a decision* based on the gospel facts. This decision involves two parts. Note the two components of this decision as stated in Acts 20:21.

Acts 20:21b

"they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus"

Let's look at each part one at a time.

Turn to God in Repentance. Repentance is presented over and over again in the New Testament as a necessary response to the gospel. Read carefully this partial list of examples below.

NT Examples of the Gospel's Call to Repentance

Matthew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Mark 1: 14b-15 Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Luke 13:3b But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Luke 16:28-30 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

Luke 24:46-47 He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Acts 11:18b So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.

Acts 17:30-31 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice

2 Corinthians 7:10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret

Hebrews 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

It is easy to see from this list that repentance is of primary importance! To properly respond to the gospel and become a Christian one must repent! In its most literal sense the word “repent” is a command that tells people that they should “completely change their thinking” which inevitably changes their behavior. Or as one lexicographer puts it, to repent is *“to change one’s way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness.”*

This same Greek word that we translate “repent” in the Bible is the same word that the ancient Hellenistic army commanders used to get their marching soldiers to turn around 180°. When they wanted their men to do an “about-face” they shouted, “Repent!”

To repent is to make a mental decision to turn around. It is critically important that we know what the gospel is telling us to *turn from*, and what the gospel is telling us to *turn to*.

With Your Partner... Use the following passages to answer those two questions:

Discuss what it is like to make a decision to become a Christian that involves this kind of mental 180°.

1 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Acts 20:21; and Acts 14:15.

Have faith in our Lord Jesus. The second component of God's required response to the gospel is to place one's faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If one has truly understood the gospel message it is not hard to see the absolute necessity of discarding any trust in one's personal righteousness (which is totally deficient before a perfect God) and having all one's trust in Jesus' righteousness (which is 100% complete). Notice this fundamental definition of saving faith as the Apostle Paul describes his new attitude toward all his "accomplishments" in trying to be righteous and acceptable to God without Christ.

Philippians 3:8b-9

I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ —the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

To put my faith in Christ means that I cease trusting in my own resume and from that point on I keep my confidence in Jesus Christ alone as the sole provision for my sinful condition!

Notice that the words used to describe faith are words like "trust" and "confidence." This is important. Unfortunately, misunderstandings about "faith" abound because over time our English word "faith" has lost its impact and is often understood as merely "believing" the truthfulness of some facts

With Your Partner...

Discuss the problem and prevalence of the assumption that to be saved one only has to agree with the facts of the gospel message.

(unfortunately, sometimes even the original Greek word is translated this way in our Bibles). Though our English dictionaries still offer a secondary definition of "belief" as having "firm faith, confidence, or trust: *I believe in your ability to solve the problem?*" most understand "belief" as simply agreeing, or giving mental assent to some proposed facts.

This has led to the false impression that to be a Christian one has to simply agree with the facts presented in the gospel message. This is a terribly costly misconception. The Bible points this out by reminding us that even the demons have a proper set of beliefs in the facts (James 2:19). "Faith" is not just believing the facts, instead real faith means transferring my trust and confidence to Jesus Christ. If a person is to become a Christian he or she must be trusting in Jesus' perfect life and his substitutionary death that he suffered in order to pay the just penalty for sin.

As you read the numerous examples of the gospel's call to "faith" you will discover that the necessary response to trust in Christ is not just for the future day of judgment, but its emphasis is very much on the here-and-now! The gospel is calling us to trust in Jesus not only to save us in the future, but also to lead us in the present. Jesus demonstrated this aspect of faith while he was here on earth by continually calling people to "follow him." After Jesus' departure the Apostles often spoke of trusting "the Lord" Jesus. The emphasis here is on his position as leader or boss of one's life. Though he is not on earth presently to physically follow and emulate, he laid down a clear pattern of living that is to be followed with the help and guidance of God's Spirit.

1 John 2:6

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

When we place our trust in Christ it is a confidence for a future deliverance from judgment *as well as* a confidence in the present lordship of Christ for our daily lives.

Chapter 3: How Do I Know That I Really Am a Christian?

Of course the most obvious way that we can know that we are Christians is to be certain that we have properly understood the gospel and have rightly responded to it. Assuming that a person is convinced of this we will briefly examine the objective indicators that give assurance of one's salvation.

Real Christians Bear Real Fruit

Wanting to avoid the tragic self-deception of would-be Christians who discover on judgment day that they were never really Christians after all (Matthew 7:22-23), let us seek to compare our lives with the primary test of true Christianity – namely, a transformed life!

When a person becomes a Christian their life is changed forever in a variety of profound ways. Some patterns in their life cease and others begin.

With Your Partner...

Discuss the overall changes that you and others witnessed in your life when you became a Christian.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

The Bible often calls these obvious changes caused by one's new relationship with Christ "fruit." Fruit is an appropriate analogy for these changes in our lives because, like fruit that is borne on a tree, these new patterns of behavior are produced as the result of God's Spirit working in and through us.

John 15:8

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

These changes are so profound that Jesus once equated the beginning of this new relationship with him to being "born again" (John 3:3). These changes include the transformation of one's core motivation, the curbing of one's sinful habits, and the initiation of new righteous habits – all of which are promised to last for a lifetime! Let's examine each of these.

Real Christianity transforms your core motivations. The Bible is clear that everyone is born sinful. We all come into this world separated from God and are wired to please ourselves. A person may choose to do this in culturally acceptable ways, but he or she is still motivated by a desire to live for “self.” When a person becomes a Christian this motivation is turned upside-down!

2 Corinthians 5:15

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again

In what ways do you see your core motivations different than before?

Real Christianity curbs your sinful habits. Christians still sin (1 John 1:10 – 2:1), but not at all like they used to! Sinful habits and continuous indulgence in sinful behaviors are broken when God gets involved in a person’s life. Where you once found addictions and vices in one’s non-Christian life, you now find freedom and deliverance in one’s Christian life (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). If there is a continuing pattern of habitual disobedience in a person’s life, even though they may claim to be a Christian, they are deceived about the genuineness of their relationship with Christ.

1 John 2:3-4

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

The curbing of sinful behavior is inevitable because Jesus came not only to remove sin from our record he also came to remove sin from our lives!

1 John 3:5-10

But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

In what ways have your sinful habits been curbed?

Real Christianity initiates new righteous habits. If one has truly repented of their sins and placed their trust in Christ, righteous habits naturally follow. Notice what the Bible says about the “proof” of real repentance and real faith.

A sure indicator that one has truly turned to God is the presence of good and righteous deeds. These new patterns of doing what God desires for us to do is not a drudgery! Because of the transformation of our core motivation doing what is right is a joy for the genuine Christian.

1 John 5:2-3

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome...

James 2:14, 17-18

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Acts 26:20b

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

What righteous habits has God initiated in your life?

Real Christianity creates changes that last a lifetime.

When people are genuinely transformed by God, the effects of that transformation last for the rest of their lives. There of course will be times of struggle and occasional defeat but their new life in Christ is never temporary. Notice the Bible's perspective when people's association with Christ *is* temporary.

For those adopted into God's family (or flock in this case) there is nothing that can sever that new relationship. It is an act of God that cannot be reversed.

With Your Partner...

Discuss the practical difficulties of admitting that "fruitless" Christians aren't Christians at all. Have you had to admit this about someone you know who claims to know God but really doesn't? Look together at Titus 1:16.

If the Christian's relationship with Jesus is secure, then it follows that the implications and effects of one's relationship with Christ are equally secure.

How does this principle of guaranteed longevity in Christ help to convert verses like the one below from passages producing fear and concern into passages that produce security and confidence?

John 10:27-29

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Hebrews 3:14

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

Big Errors Regarding Christianity & Good Deeds!

So far we have studied 1) the right gospel, 2) the proper response to the gospel, and 3) the good deeds that follow. It is critical that we understand the relationship between these elements and never confuse them. Confusing the role of any of the elements we have discussed can have disastrous results. There are two primary ways that people tend to misunderstand them.

The first error is a fatal one. Almost every cult group in the world falls into this trap. Notice that though they may include the proper elements they certainly don't understand them as presented in the Bible because they place them wrongly into the biblical equation. The first popular error looks like this:

$$1) \text{ The Gospel} + 2) \text{ The Response} + 3) \text{ Good Deeds} = \text{Being a Christian}$$

Those who believe the equation on the previous page say that if you want to become a Christian you must:

- 1) understand the gospel;
 - 2) respond to the gospel with repentance and faith;
 - 3) do a lot of good deeds;
- ...and then you will become a Christian!

With Your Partner...

Discuss the various groups with which you are familiar who say that our good works are the basis for our salvation (wholly or in part).

When we took a closer look at faith on page 15 it became clear that the call to faith was a call to put our trust in Christ, and Christ alone. We saw that we must abandon any confidence in our own righteousness and trust fully in the righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ. The equation above bases our salvation (at least in part) on the accomplishment of our own good deeds. This is thoroughly unbiblical! Notice in the following verses that our good deeds play no role in bringing about our salvation. We are saved through the work of Christ and what he has done for us, not what we have accomplished ourselves!

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Titus 3:4-5a

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

These verses make it clear that our salvation is not based on the good deeds that we do. Unfortunately, some have understood these verses to mean that good works are not important in the equation at all. That is the second big error people can make when thinking through the elements involved in salvation.

1 John 2:19

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

When people take good deeds and fruit out of the equation altogether it looks something like this:

$$\mathbf{1) \text{ The Gospel} + 2) \text{ The Response} = \text{Being a Christian}}$$

They would say, if you want to be sure you are a Christian just make sure that:

- 1)** you have understood the gospel;
- 2)** you have responded to the gospel;

...then you can be sure you are a Christian regardless of whether you see any fruit of that decision or not.

We have already seen that this is an unacceptable equation according to the Bible. Real Christians produce real fruit! Jesus said:

Matthew 7:16-20

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Summary!

The gospel message properly understood, coupled with a biblical response to the gospel (repentance & faith) makes one a Christian who then bears fruit (good deeds). An accurate summary of the gospel elements should look like this:

1) The Gospel + **2) The Response** = **Being a Christian** + **3) Good Deeds**

If you want to be sure that you are a Christian, you should evaluate your life and make sure that:

- 1)** you have understood the gospel as presented in the Bible;
- 2)** you have rightly responded to the gospel with repentance and faith;
- 3)** you are producing fruit or good deeds as evidence of your Christianity.

If after working through this chapter you are convinced that you are *not* a Christian, either because you have never understood the gospel, or because you have never rightly responded to the gospel, or because you realize that there has never been any genuine fruit in your life, then make that decision to become a Christian right now!

If you choose to make this decision now, be sure to review the gospel message (starts on page 9), then make a wholehearted decision to repent of your sins and put your full trust in Christ. If your decision is genuine you will begin to see the fruit of this decision from this day forward!

With Your Partner...

If you made this decision today be sure and tell your partner!

Your Story

Writing out your testimony (the story of how you became a Christian) can be helpful in harmonizing your experience with the teachings of the Bible. Often the temptation is to reinterpret the Bible to maintain my story. Remember that your testimony is a subjective recollection of what you think happened in the establishment of your relationship with God. The Bible is clear, objective, and timeless. God would much prefer that we reinterpret our testimony to be in sync with the clear statements of Scripture. That may mean that I need to admit that I did not really become a Christian when I thought I did. It may mean that something that I considered a “rededication” was really the point when I became a Christian and began to see fruit in my life. It may mean that what I believed to be genuine fruit at some point in my life was actually artificial and short-lived.

Whatever the case, don't be afraid to reevaluate your story especially the timing of 1) when you properly understood the biblical gospel, 2) when you rightly responded to the gospel with repentance and faith, 3) when your life began to reflect the transformation that happens when a person becomes a Christian.

Describe the point in your life when you really understood the biblical gospel.

Describe the events that surrounded your response of repentance and faith.

Describe the fruit in your life that gives evidence of your new life in Christ.