

What Is a Biblical Christian?

There are many matters concerning which total ignorance and complete indifference are neither tragic nor fatal. I am sure that there are few of us who can explain all the processes by which a brown cow eats green grass and gives white milk—but we can still enjoy the milk! Many of us are totally ignorant of Einstein's theory of relativity, and if we were pressed to explain it we would really be in difficulty. And not only are we ignorant of Einstein's theory but most of us are quite indifferent; yet our ignorance and indifference are neither tragic nor fatal.

There are some matters, however, concerning which ignorance and indifference are both tragic and fatal. One such matter is the answer to the question, "What is a biblical Christian?" In other words, according to the Scriptures, when does a man, woman, boy or girl have the right to the name "Christian"?

One must not make the assumption lightly that he or she is a true Christian. A false conclusion at this point is tragic and fatal. Therefore I want to set before you four strands of the Bible's answer to the question, "What is a biblical Christian?"

1 According to the Bible, a Christian is a person who has faced realistically the problem of his own personal sin.

One of the many things which distinguishes the Christian faith from the other religions of the world is that Christianity is essentially and fundamentally a sinner's religion. When the angel announced to Joseph the approaching birth of Jesus Christ, he did so in these words, "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." The Lord Jesus Christ himself says in Luke 5:31-32, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." A Christian is one who has faced realistically the problem of his own personal sin.

When we turn to the Scriptures, we find 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 and, on the other hand, the problem of a bad heart. If we start in Genesis 3 and begin with the tragic account of man's rebellion against God and his fall into sin, then trace the biblical doctrine of sin all the way through to the Book of the Revelation, we see that it is not oversimplification to say that everything that the Bible teaches about the doctrine of sin can be reduced to these two fundamental categories—the problem of a bad record and the problem of a bad heart.

What do I mean by "the problem of a bad record"? I am using that terminology to describe what the Scriptures set before us as the doctrine of human guilt because of sin. The Scriptures tell us plainly that we obtained a bad record long before we had any personal existence upon the earth: "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

When did the "all" sin? We all sinned in Adam. He was appointed by God to represent all of the human race. When he sinned, we sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. That is why the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." Man was created without sin in the Garden of Eden; but from the moment Adam sinned, we too were charged with guilt. We fell in him in his first transgression and we are part of a race that is under condemnation.

Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that after we are born, additional guilt accrues to us for our own personal transgressions. The Word of God teaches that, "There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20); and every single sin incurs additional guilt. Our record in heaven is a marred record. Almighty God measures the totality of our human experience by a standard which is absolutely inflexible. This standard touches not only our external deeds but also our thoughts and the very motions of our hearts—so much so, that the Lord Jesus said that the stirring of unjust anger is the very essence of murder, and the look with intention to lust is adultery (Matthew 5:22,28).

God is keeping a detailed record. That record is among “the books” which will be opened in the day of judgment (Revelation 20:12). In those books are recorded every thought, every motive, every intention, every deed, and 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—a record according to which we are guilty. We have real guilt for real sin committed against the true and the living God. This is why the Scriptures tell us that the entire human race stands guilty before Almighty God (Romans 3:19).

Has the problem of your own bad record ever become a burning, pressing, personal concern? Have you faced the truth that Almighty God judged you guilty when your father Adam sinned, and holds you guilty for every single word you have spoken contrary to perfect holiness, justice, purity and righteousness? He knows every object you have touched and taken contrary to the sanctity of property. He knows every word spoken contrary to perfect, absolute truth. Has this ever broken in upon you, so that you have 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?

But this problem of a bad record is not our only problem. We have an additional problem—the problem of a bad heart. The Bible teaches that the problem of our sin arises not only from what we have done, but from what we are. When Adam sinned, he not only became guilty before God, he also became defiled and polluted in his nature.

This defilement is described in Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Jesus describes it in Mark 7:21: “From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts”; and then he names all the various sins that can be seen in any newspaper on any given day—murder, adultery, blasphemy, pride. Jesus said that these things rise out of an artesian well of pollution, the human heart. Notice carefully that he did not say, “For from without, by the pressure of society and its negative influences, come forth murder and adultery and pride and theft.” That is what our so-called sociological experts tell us. They say it is “the condition of society” that produces crime and rebellion; Jesus says it is the condition of the human heart.

Each of us by nature has a heart that the Scriptures describe as “desperately wicked,” a fountain of all forms of iniquity. Romans 8:7 asserts, “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.” Paul does not say that the carnal mind, that is, the mind that has never been regenerated by God, has some enmity; he calls it enmity itself: “The carnal mind is enmity against God.” The disposition of every human heart by nature can be 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 enmity against God.

Has the problem of your bad heart ever become a pressing personal concern to you? I am not asking in theory whether you believe in human sinfulness. You might agree that there are such things as a sinful nature and a sinful heart. My question is, have your bad record and your bad heart ever become matters of deep, inward, 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? Have you seen the horribleness of a heart that is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked”?

A biblical Christian is a person who has in all seriousness taken to heart his own personal problem of sin. 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 anyone who did not know himself to be a sinner. He said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance”(Matthew 9:13). Are you a biblical Christian—one who has taken seriously your own problem of sin?

2 A biblical 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. The verses some of us learned in our youth emphasize God’s initiative in providing a remedy for sinful man: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son”; “In this is love, not that we loved

God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”; “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us” (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10; Ephesians 2:4).

A unique feature of the Christian faith is that it is not a religious self-help scheme where you patch yourself up with the aid of God. Just as surely as it is a unique tenet of the Christian faith that Christ is the only Savior for sinners, so it is also a unique tenet of the Christian faith that all of our true help comes down from above and meets us where we are. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps; God in mercy breaks in upon the human situation and does something which we could never do for ourselves.

When we turn to the Scriptures, we find that God’s divine remedy has at least three simple but profoundly wonderful focal points:

(a) First of all, God’s remedy for sin 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, but it is bound up in a Person: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son”; “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (John 3:16; Matthew 1:21). Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

The divine remedy for sin is bound up in a Person, and that Person is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ—the eternal Word who became man, uniting a true human nature to his divine nature. Here is God’s provision for man with his bad record and his bad heart: a Savior who is both God and man, the two natures joined in the one Person for ever. If your personal problem of sin is ever to be remedied in a biblical way, it will be remedied only as you have personal dealings with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such is the unique strand of the Christian faith: the sinner in all his need, united to the Savior in all the fullness of his grace; the sinner in his naked need, and the Savior in his almighty power, brought directly together in the Gospel. That reality is the glory of God’s Good News to sinners!

(b) Secondly, God’s remedy for sin is centered in the cross upon which Jesus Christ died. When we turn to the Scriptures we find that the divine remedy in a unique way is centered in the cross of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist uses the Old Testament image of the sacrificial lamb when he points to Jesus and says, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus himself said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

True preaching of the Gospel is so much centered in the cross that Paul says it is the word or message of the cross. The preaching of the cross is “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). When Paul came to Corinth—a center of intellectualism and pagan Greek philosophy—he did not follow their prescribed patterns of rhetoric but said that he “determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The cross is not to be thought of as an abstract idea or a religious symbol; the meaning of the cross is what God declares it to mean. The cross was the place where God, by imputation, heaped the sins of his people upon his Son. On that cross there was substitutionary curse-bearing. In the language of the apostle Paul, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13), and “He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The cross is not a nebulous, indefinable symbol of self-giving love; on the contrary, the cross is the monumental display of how God can be just and still pardon guilty sinners. At the cross, 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 forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46).

At Calvary, God is demonstrating in the visible world what is 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 deserve. Jesus hangs on the cross in the posture of a guilty criminal; for him society has but one verdict: “Away with him”—“Crucify him”—“Hand him over to death”—and God does not intervene. 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 Jesus to feel in the depths of his own soul all of the fury of the wrath that should be vented upon us.

(c) Thirdly, God's remedy for sin is adequate for all men, and it is offered to all men without discrimination. Before we have any felt consciousness of our sin, it is very easy to think that God can forgive sinners. But when you and I begin to have any idea at all of what sin is, our thoughts are changed. We see ourselves as little worms of the dust, creatures whose very life and breath are held in the hands of the God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

We begin to take seriously that we have dared to defy the God who consigned angels to everlasting darkness when they rebelled against him. We confess that this holy God sees the effusions of our foul, corrupt human hearts. Then we say, "O God, how can you be anything other than just? 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? How can you be a righteous God and do anything other than consign me to everlasting punishment with those angels that rebelled?"

When we begin to feel the reality of our sin, forgiveness becomes the most stubborn problem with which our mind has ever wrestled. It is then that we need to know that in a Person, and that Person crucified, God has provided a remedy adequate for all men and offered to all men without discrimination.

If any conditions were placed on the availability of Christ we would say, "Surely I don't meet the conditions; surely I don't qualify." The wonder of God's provision is that it comes in these unfettered terms: "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1); "The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37).

See the beauty of the free offer of mercy in Jesus Christ! We do not need God to step out of heaven and tell us that we, by name, are warranted to come; we have the unfettered offer of mercy in the words of his own Son, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The divine terms are two: repent and believe. Of Jesus' earliest ministry it is recorded, "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). After his resurrection Jesus told his disciples that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The apostle Paul testified "to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

3 A biblical Christian is one who has wholeheartedly complied with the terms for obtaining God's provision for sin.

What are the divine terms for obtaining the divine provision? We must repent, and we must believe. Although it is necessary to discuss these as separate concepts, we must not think that repentance is ever divorced from faith or that faith is ever divorced from repentance. True faith is permeated with repentance, and true repentance is permeated with faith. They interpenetrate one another in such a way that, whenever there's a true appropriation of the divine provision, you will find a believing penitent and a penitent believer.

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 (that is, 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 Son coming to his senses in the far country. Rather than remain at home under his father's rule, he had asked to receive his inheritance early and left home for a far country, where he squandered it. Reduced to misery through his sins, he came to himself and said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:17-19).

When the Prodigal Son recognized his sin he did not sit there and think about it, write poetry about it, or send telegrams home to Dad. The Scripture says, “And he arose and came to his father” (vs. 20). He left those companions who were his friends in sin; he abhorred everything that belonged to that life-style and turned his back on it. What was it that drew him home? It was the confidence that there was a gracious father with a large heart and with a righteous rule for his happy, loving home. He did not write 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, or 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. So he left the far country.

It is a beautiful stroke in our Lord’s picture when he says, “But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him” (vs. 20). The Prodigal did not come strutting up to his father, talking about making a decision to come home.

There is a notion today that people can walk up an aisle, pray a little prayer, and do God a favor by making their decision. This has nothing to do with true conversion. 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. Yet when I am prepared to leave my sin, turn my back upon it and come back meekly, wondering if indeed there can be mercy for me, then—wonder of wonders!—the Father meets me, and throws his arms of reconciling love and mercy about me. I say, not in a sentimental way but in all truth, that he smothers repenting sinners in forgiving and redemptive love.

But 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 and who love the world’s ways? Perhaps in your personal life, or in relationship to your parents, or in your social life where you take so lightly the sanctity of the body, you show what you really are.

Maybe some of you are involved in fornication, or in heavy petting, or in looking at the kind of stuff on television and in the movies that feeds your lust, and yet you name the name of Christ. You live in the hog pens and then go to a house of God on Sunday. Shame on you! Leave your hog pens and your haunts of sin. Leave your patterns and practices of fleshly and carnal indulgence. 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 in the Gospel. “But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name” (John 1:12). Faith is likened to drinking of Christ, for in my soul-thirst I drink of him. Faith is likened to looking to Christ, and following Christ, and fleeing to Christ. The Bible uses many analogies and the sum of all of them is this: in the nakedness of my need I cast myself upon the Savior, 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. What is in Christ? Full pardon for all my sins! His perfect obedience is put to my account. His death is counted as mine. The gift of the Spirit is in him. Adoption, sanctification and ultimately glorification are all in him; and faith, by taking Christ, receives all that is in him. “You are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

What is a biblical 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 that is screwed to the jamb. They are held together by a pin, and on that hinge the door turns. Christ is that door, but none enters through him who does not repent and believe.

There is no true hinge made up only of repentance. Repentance that is not joined to faith is a legalistic repentance. It terminates on yourself and on your sin. Likewise, there is no true hinge made up only of faith. Professed faith that is not joined to repentance is a spurious faith, for true faith is faith in Christ to save me not in but from my sin. Repentance and faith are inseparable, and “unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). The unbelieving are named among those who “shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

4 A biblical Christian is a person who manifests in his life that his claims to repentance and faith are real.

Paul preached that men should repent and turn to God and do works consistent with repentance (Acts 26:20). God intends that there should be such works: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Paul says in Galatians 5 that faith works by love. Wherever there is true faith in Christ, genuine love to Christ will be implanted. And where there is love to Christ there will be obedience to Christ. “He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me...He who does not love me does not keep my words” (John 14:21-24). We are saved by trusting Christ, not by loving and obeying Christ, but a trust that does not produce love and obedience is not true saving faith.

True faith works by love, and that which love works is not the ability to sit out on a beautiful starlit night and write poetry about how exciting it is to be a Christian. True faith works by causing you to go back into your home and to obey your father and your mother, or to love your husband or wife and children as the Bible tells you to do, or to go back to your school or to your job to take a stand for truth and righteousness against all the pressure of your peers.

True faith makes you willing to be counted as a fool and crazy—willing to be considered outdated—because you believe that there are eternal, unchangeable moral and ethical standards. You are willing to believe in chastity and the sanctity of human life and to take your stand against premarital sex and the murdering of babies in mothers’ wombs. For Jesus said, “Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

What is a biblical Christian? It is 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, and that it is adequately and freely offered to all. I know it comes to all who repent and believe.” That is not enough.

Do you repent and believe? And if you profess to repent and believe, 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 to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, “but he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). In Hebrews 5:9 we read, “He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” 1 John 2:4 says, “He who says, ‘I know him,’ and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

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, obedience to Christ, and confession of Christ? Is your behavior marked by adherence to the ways of Christ? Not perfectly—no! Every day you must pray, “Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me.” But at the same time you can also say, “For me to live is Christ” or, in the words of the hymn,

Jesus I my cross have taken
All to leave and follow thee.

A true Christian follows Jesus. How many of us are true, biblical Christians? I leave you to answer in the deep chambers of your own mind and heart.

But remember, answer with an answer that you will be prepared to live with for eternity. Be content with no answer but one that will find you comfortable in death, and safe in the day of judgment.Ω

Albert N. Martin has served for over twenty-five years as pastor of Trinity Baptist Church of Montville, New Jersey.
