

BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE

ACTS 19:1-10 OCTOBER 7, 2020

What does it mean to *be* a Christian? If you were asked that question how would you answer? The question is *not* “how do you *become* a Christian,” but “what does it mean to *be* a Christian?”

We would probably start with a set of beliefs. But what people put on that list can be shockingly varied. Organizations like Barna and Pew Research Center study these sort of questions. Here are some findings that might surprise you: Pew found that 20% of self-described Christians do not believe in the God of the Bible.¹ 42% of evangelicals say they believe God accepts worship from all religions.² 65% of *evangelicals* said they believed this statement: “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”³

While we know you can't have Christian faith without a set of beliefs, we also know that it is *more* than simply a list of facts and precepts. Christianity is a life that is lived out. A *new* life in relationship with the living God. And so it is *more* than just a body of knowledge. It includes experience and advancement and participation in the unfolding plan of God as He pours out His power all over the earth. As students of the Bible, this is what we learn about the Christian life. So, when asked “what does it mean to be a Christian,” we would probably begin by talking about the Lord and the truths He has revealed which we accept in faith and then we'd also start talking about things like the Great Commission - that ongoing rescue program that God has drafted us into.

But, believe it or not, nearly *half* of practicing Christian millennials believe it is *wrong* to share your faith with someone of a different religion. In other words: evangelism.⁴ And “when asked if they had previously heard of the Great Commission, 1/2 of U.S. churchgoers say they do not know the term.”⁵

Where am I going with all of this? It's not just to depress us about the state of things. Tonight our text provides a great exposé on what it means to *be* a Christian. We will see a group of people who are earnest seekers of truth, they *want* to believe. Yet, the content of their faith is severely lacking. Paul comes along and starts to fill in that necessary content. But it's not all academic. At the same time, we see the spiritual *activity* of Christians. Put together we see once again how Acts presents Christianity as a life that encompasses the mind, the heart and the hands and feet. That Christianity is about developing *and* delivering. That spiritual education and spiritual experience are *both* a necessity in the life of a Biblical Christian.

As we begin, we find Paul making good on the promise he made back in chapter 18, verse 21. He returns to the city of Ephesus. For background, we know that there are Christians there already, Priscilla and Aquila might still be hanging out. But now Paul's back to do God's work.

Acts 19:1 - While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples ²and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” “No,” they told him, “we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

¹ <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/26/17282284/pew-americans-god-religion-study-faith-identity>

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/evangelicals-belief-ligonier-lifeway-theology-heresy-survey.html>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>

⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/half-churchgoers-not-heard-great-commission/>

Luke calls them disciples, but we'll find out they're ignorant of Jesus. We might think of them as Old Testament believers, though some commentators believe they were connected with the local church in town. Paul is going to be a big help to them and we'll see him bring them along graciously.

As Christians, we should understand that the people we encounter come from a wide variety of backgrounds with different levels of exposure to the Bible and Jesus. The way forward is *grace*. And, as a *church*, we want to be as welcoming as possible while we proclaim the truth. This is one of the sad realities of churches that become really ingrown. They gather together, as a like-minded group, preaching to themselves. But if no outsiders can ever come in, what good is the preaching? We want to be welcoming to *all sorts*. Paul was open to speak to Pharisees or Sadducees, Jews or Gentiles, pagans or tradesmen, seekers or mockers.

We don't know how Paul came across these guys, but as they interacted, something about them gave him the impression that they definitely had *faith*, but that they were *deficient* in their spiritual lives. We see it there, he says, "When you believed..." *but*, it's clear to him that something was off.

What was it? We don't know. But we can guess that, even in their earnestness and zeal, they *lacked* the marks of the indwelling Holy Spirit. What *are* His marks? This is an important question, because if you're a Christian here tonight they are supposed to be marks showing on *your* life.

God's word tells us what the fruit of the Spirit is: Love. Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. To be a Christian is to be marked by these. In addition, the presence of supernatural empowering to serve God with spiritual gifts.

Since we believe the Bible to speak truthfully not only about who God is but who *we* are, we can have certain expectations about spiritual development in our personal Christianity. The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives isn't like Rogaine, which *might* encourage hair growth in some people. That's not how the Christian life is meant to go. When we walk with God, He *does* complete what He began. Which means you and I *do* bear fruit, which will lead not only to wonderful blessings, but also to us becoming recognizably different when others look at us. Different in disposition. Different in communication. Different in focus and perspective.

Because, being a Christian doesn't just mean you're certified for heaven. It means you are a *new creation*. Brand new. A new mind. A new heart. A new purpose. New *abilities* given to you by the Holy Spirit to glorify God and serve Him and others. Of course that will stand out as we cooperate with what God wants to do in us.

So, Paul saw these guys and thought to himself: I'm looking at caterpillars here, not butterflies. They were missing that spiritual transformation that is promised to Christians.

Before we move forward we should recognize that these verses are a historic battleground between different groups of Christians. There's a big fight here over Pentecostalism and the gifts of the Spirit. I'm going to touch on some of those themes tonight, but not nearly as much as is necessary, because it's an important issue and one that people get very emotional about. If you would like to know more about what the Bible says on the subject and our church position, visit calvaryhanford.com/tobecontinued.

Now, Paul asked these guys "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" It's time to turn that question on ourselves. *Doctrinally*, we know, thanks to the special revelation of the New Testament, that "when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by *giving* you the Holy

Spirit.”⁶ So the question for us is not “did you receive,” it’s, “*since* you received, is there a difference?” Because the Bible *also* explains that Christians are able to quench the Spirit. And that, having *begun* in the Spirit we can drift into a life that’s not spiritual. Therefore, we’re commanded to go on being filled. Are we? Are we marked by His leading and influence and power in our lives?

Acts 19:3 - ³“Into what then were you baptized?” he asked them. “Into John’s baptism,” they replied.

So, these guys were disciples of John the Baptist. That means they believed in repenting of their sins and were waiting for the arrival of the Messiah. There are a couple of good thoughts for us here. First of all, it’s ok to find out where people are coming from. These guys were seen as spiritual, labeled as disciples, but after a little investigation we discover they don’t even know who Jesus is. So, when you’re interacting with people (or with podcasts) do a little research.

Second, Paul asks them another great question that we can turn on ourselves. Into what were *you* baptized? If you’re a Christian and you’ve never been baptized, it’s something you should do because your King has commanded it. But if you *have* been baptized, remember what that means. It’s not just some meaningless ritual. It is the outward demonstration of what has gone on in your heart and it is the demonstration of what we might call positional reality. To be a Christian, being baptized means that you *identify* with Him in His death, burial and resurrection. It means now you are *dead* to sin. It means you have been cleansed from your unrighteousness and raised up into a new, supernaturally motivated life. It means you have now been given a ministry of reconciliation.⁷

This verse also gives us a little devotional idea: These guys had been baptized under John the Baptist’s ministry. Here they are, *25 years later*, still waiting for the Messiah. Still earnest. Still trusting God. Still living a spiritual life, incomplete as it was.

While we don’t want to be lacking in the ways they were, they are an inspiration for us. We *know* the Messiah, but we, too, get to wait for him, eagerly, with expectation. Whether that takes 25 years or 25 hours. Don’t lose hope. He’s coming. We’re waiting.

Acts 19:4 - ⁴Paul said, “John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the one who would come after him, that is, in Jesus.”

These guys were missing some very important and essential information. There *are* essentials when it comes to Christian belief. For example, if you don’t believe Jesus Christ really lived or that He is really God or that He really died on the cross and rose again, *then you are not a Christian*. You may be religious or philosophical, but you’re not a Christian.

Now, these guys were good guys. We would’ve described them as holy and devout. But you see, all they had done was turn their backs on sin, as John had told them. But, without a Messiah, they were directionless.

J.C. Ryle put it this way: “You may cast away your old habits, as a serpent casts off his skin, but if you are not resting all upon the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world...you have... received the grace of God in vain.”⁸

⁶ Ephesians 1:13

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:18

⁸ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-19-commentary>

It does no good to reform behavior if the heart is not won for Jesus Christ. These guys were fine, moral, religious men. But they needed *Jesus* to come and take hold of them. And, from their negative example we might say that, to be a Christian means you're *for* something. Not sin. You've turned from those idols and left them far behind. But now your life is *for* the Lord. For His glory. For His service. For His pleasure. We're not just *out* of evil, we're now *in* Christ.

Acts 19:5 - ⁵When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

These guys are earnest, humble, obedient. Those are marks of Christianity. Having been filled in on what they were missing they *immediately* said, "I want to belong to Christ. I want to join His Kingdom and be forever marked by Him."

Acts 19:6-7 - ⁶And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. ⁷Now there were about twelve men in all.

So now we see that not only was their education made more complete, they also had a new, supernatural experience. There are, of course, some who believe and teach that to be a Christian means you *must* speak in tongues and experience what we call the "sign" gifts, like those we're seeing here. That is neither the teaching of the New Testament or the pattern seen in Acts.

However, what *is* clear is that being a Christian means you will be supernaturally gifted and empowered to live out a life that includes the impossible for Christ Jesus. While we reject many of the carnal excesses of Pentecostalism, we simultaneously do not believe in *or want* a form of Christianity that is devoid of the supernatural. God says He has spiritual gifts for you. Different kinds and different works, but the Holy Spirit distributes to each and every Christian some sort of gift. Christianity is not just "I believe a set of doctrines and I attend church and I don't do bad things." What about the power of God and His living water rushing like a torrent through your life? What about overcoming the world? Confounding the wisdom of the wise? What about receiving the dynamic *power* of God the Holy Spirit that it might show through us like treasure in clay jars?

Christianity is *not* simply a moral philosophy. And it's more than just us checking in with the Man upstairs from time to time. It is an all-encompassing, supernatural life, lived out by people who have been made dead to sin and alive in Christ who now operate as His Body on the earth.

In this passage, many commentators rush to tell you how there's no supernatural outpouring of the Spirit in these ways anymore. That we "have no reason to expect" extraordinary gifts. But how could that be true? The Father sent the Spirit to be with us and to help us and to guide us and lead us and bring dynamic power into our lives so that we can accomplish wonderful, eternal work.

Part of that work is us exercising spiritual gifts, here demonstrated by tongues and prophecy. Some of you have these gifts. You need to exercise them. We learn the proper way to do that when gathered together as we look at passages like 1 Corinthians 12-14. But being a Christian means not leaving God's precious gifts, hand-picked for us, left on the shelf.

So we see these guys exercising spiritual gifts. What are *your* gifts? If you were about to retire and your accountant said to you, "What are your assets?" You probably wouldn't say, "I dunno." You know what they are because you'll *need* them. Or, if someone said, "You've received a significant inheritance." You wouldn't say, "I don't need to know about it."

God has gifted you, to grow you and bless you and use you to serve others. Being a Christian means not only discovering those things but then exercising them.

Now, if the story ended here, we might be tempted to think that charismatic experiences are the pinnacle of Christian living. But it doesn't. We've got a few more verbs as Paul continued his work.

Acts 19:8 - ⁸Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, arguing and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

The Apostle showed a great ability to balance. He could balance ministry inside the church and outside to unbelievers. We find him both evangelizing and making it a point to develop strengthen those who already believe.

Being a Christian means getting involved in ministry, not simply going from experience to experience. Paul said he spoke in tongues more than anybody. And he, *clearly*, had a profound communion with God. But we don't see him going from afterglow to afterglow. He was balanced looking in and looking out, doing the ministry while also continuing to develop himself.

Acts 19:9-10 - ⁹But when some became hardened and would not believe, slandering the Way in front of the crowd, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples, and conducted discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰This went on for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.

We note here that this ministry was based on "discussions," not Pentecostal ecstasies. He *could* have hosted spontaneous tongues services, right? But he didn't. So, on the one hand we see him looking at these guys in the first part and saying, "You guys need the filling of the Holy Spirit!" And leading them to that wonderful reality. And now we see him saying, "the people of this city need rightly divided truth, presented in a way they can understand." It's balance.

As Christians and as a church we've got to find a way to walk the line where our faith isn't *just* a list of intellectual bullet points of orthodox doctrines. But it also cannot be just a pursuit of particular manifestations that seem amazing to us. These are the camps people tend to fall into. One or the other, and they're both missing something vital. The *Biblical* way, detailed in the Epistles, exemplified in Acts, is to have a vibrant relationship with God based upon truth that *operates* in us. That we continually grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's word, while also perpetually exercising the supernatural gifts that have been supplied by the Holy Spirit. Being a Christians means that we believe *and* we move. With purpose. According to truth. There should be a *liveliness* to us that is recognizable and yet unexplainable to the world around us. A life and a church characterized by proper knowledge *and* powerful activity. It's possible. It's God's plan. Let's participate. Be all that you can be as a Christian.