

Who Are We?

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In the church I hear all kinds of different explanations of who and what a Christian is. Some are simplistic and yet accurate. Others are complicated and still accurate. But some are simplistic and inaccurate. Others, of course, are complicated and inaccurate. But what does it mean to be a Christian? How do you know you're "saved"? What does a Christian think and do? What does a Christian believe? What tenets or doctrines of faith must a Christian adhere to?

Questions like these have been around for quite a while. The beauty of the Gospel is that it is simple enough for a child to understand and accept, and yet it will take more than a lifetime to fully plumb the depths of its rich meaning and implications. There are several ways of explaining the difference between the believer and unbeliever throughout the New Testament. But we must take these images and explanations to heart or we will find ourselves in sin because we believe that we are sinners instead of believers.

The word Christian has its origins in a persecution of people who followed Jesus. In Acts 11:25-26, we learn that followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch. The word Christian means "Christ one," or "one like Christ." But this term can only be found three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The way the apostles describe the change in a person's life when Jesus is their Lord is more commonly referred to as the new birth by John, the new life or new creation by

Paul, saints by almost every New Testament author, child of God by Paul and others, and a host of other terms to explain this change.

Let us see the significance of some of these images. I want to start with the word "saint" which believers are called as the recipients of most of the Pauline letters and the general letters. Almost every book in the New Testament calls believers saints. What is a saint? Well, a saint is a football player from New Orleans... A saint also has the root word in Greek of the word "holy." Now, that changes things, especially the phrase that many sinning Christians are so fond of using, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace."

That phrase is true at the moment of salvation. But after salvation, it is a truth about the beginning of your walk with God, because when you become a believer in Jesus, you are no longer a sinner. Calling yourself a sinner after you have been transformed by Christ weakens the power of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. I cringe when I hear well-meaning Christians who so easily revert to a previous life of sin with that phrase as if it forgives their minor falls into sin as believers. It does not. All believers sin from time to time. Don't excuse it. Stop doing it! Because you are a "holy one," a saint now. You live a holy lifestyle. In fact, you're rote behavior and default nature is one of holy living. Sin is a rarity and a blip on the radar screen, not a common occurrence. As we grow more in Christ, we become more worthy of the name

we are called by all of God's apostles in the New Testament, a saint of God.

Another term used to describe this transformation brought by Christ is the new life or new creation. Paul calls us a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). There is literally in Paul's mind such a dramatic change that God simply starts over, making everything about you new and different. For starters, your mind, your body, your soul, have been completely reconfigured. Where you were born into a world of sin and only knew sin before, you are equipped in the new creation with a heart that searches for God and sensitive to His presence and work in your life. Your mind now thinks on the good things of God rather than perfecting your effectiveness to sin against Him. Your body is commanded to do the works that glorify God.

The new life also follows on the heels of the new creation. Although God has completely made your whole person and nature new and reactive to Him rather than the world and sin, you still live in the world. You are affected by the world. It is still fallen. The key is to ignore sin because a believer is dead to sin. There is no reaction to the desires of sin. No longer do you simply sin because it's all you know. Now you can choose to not sin. The Holy Spirit teaches you how to live for God. We don't have to do what the world does. We are different. We also have a history. Even though we are new creatures, everyone knows our old life, not the new life chapters that are currently being written.

Another way the New Testament writers talk about our identity in Christ is with the metaphor that Jesus Himself uses, that of the new birth, found especially in John 3. The

new birth doesn't make sense to us because we have already been born. How can we be born again? This is the argument that Nicodemus has with Jesus. But the new birth is the prelude to understanding the new creation and new life. Before we can be a new creation and carry out a new life, we must first be born with this new nature to glorify God and this new life that is a string of events of our worshipful actions. We must first be born again into our new creation.

The final image we receive is being children of God. I prefer to use this image when I talk to Christians who occasionally sin. They feel so bad, so broken, so guilty. And then they say that they aren't even saved anymore. That's not true. This is precisely why God inspired this image of being one of His children. The first idea of this image is that we inherit God's kingdom and His eternal life. But the imagery of being His child is much deeper than that.

When you are a child in your family, you are tied to that family. You cannot change the family you were born into. You cannot ever have someone else's blood and features. You are born into a family and that is who you are. You can legally be disowned and you can try very hard to remake yourself, but for all intents and purposes, you will always be so-and-so's son or daughter. So also, you are God's son or daughter. Your family is God's family. When a child breaks something, say, a precious heirloom, what do the parents do? Do they throw the child out on the street and say, "You're not my kid anymore!?" No. They might punish the child, but they don't disown the child. So also, when we occasionally sin, God does not disown us so that we are no longer His children. We have to work very hard at losing that privileged status and relationship.

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He doesn't let us go so easily. We are still His children. He will discipline us for our sins against Him when they happen, but He will not take away all of the inheritance of being His child.

In a world where we struggle to know our identity in Christ, that we might have some peace about our relationship with Him, we must know our place. It is a place of grace and privilege. It is not a place in which to demand things of God, but rather to enjoy the things of God. It is a place of constant fluxes of growth, of changing to be more like Him. It is a fun and exciting adventure to know Him fully. Happy trails!