

Ever been cheated?

Ever been cheated? I guess you have at some time or other. In the world today there seems to be so much deception and cheating. Sometimes when buying something, people are given short change. And then there's deceptive advertising and deceptive packaging: the product is not as good as it is claimed, or it is much smaller than the outside packet appears to make it. Sometimes the cheating is much more serious: a person thinks they have bought a good and reliable car, only to find out that it has been patched up with fibre glass, worn bearings are packed with grease and the engine or gearbox will very soon need expensive repairs. While I was in Europe some time ago I read in a newspaper about students from the United States who thought that they were getting cheap charter flights to Europe but when they arrived in Europe and were supposed to collect their return ticket, which they had paid for, they found out that the charter company was either bankrupt or that there was no such address from which to collect their return ticket.

But the most serious deception you will ever come across is this: Many people think that they are Christians, and that when they die they will go to be with God in Heaven, but they have never really become a true Christian, and may not find out until it is too late. Don't you be cheated out of everlasting life by a deception of the devil! Do **you** know what a person must do to become a Christian and have the assurance of eternal life? Many people think they do, but they are wrong – they have been deceived by wrong teaching and wrong ideas, and unless they find out the truth, they will be cheated out of the most wonderful thing that God has promised us – eternal life in Heaven with Him.

Don't get me wrong! I'm not trying to push any particular denomination: I don't mind what church you go to, but I am concerned

that you find the true life in Christ. Everything that follows is completely Biblical – these are not my ideas, they are what God says. This is why I have frequently quoted from the Bible, God's Word, and though I have given a simple translation of these verses, in every case I have given the reference so that you can look the verses up in any translation of the Bible that you like, and see that they are true. I have only one aim: to show you what GOD says a Christian is and how you can become a true Christian.

What a Christian is NOT

There are a lot of wrong ideas as to what is a Christian, so let us start by looking at what a Christian is not.

1. Not everyone is a Christian

It is a fairly common idea that everyone is a Christian, "After all, God made us all, and we're all brothers and sisters, aren't we?" people often ask. The answer, however, is No! It is true that God made us all, and so we are all His creatures – His creation – but we are not all His children. Later on we will see what the Bible says a person must do to become a Christian, a child of God, but in the meantime let us look at some examples that will show us that obviously not everyone is a Christian. The word "Christian" really means a follower of Christ. An atheist, who denies the existence of God and does not believe in Christ, is obviously not a Christian. Nor can a person who has never heard of Jesus, be one of His followers. Likewise, Muslims who follow Mohammed, Hindus who worship a multitude of gods, and Buddhist ancestor worshippers, are obviously not Christians – they do not believe in, or follow after, the teachings of Christ. Not only this, but Jesus was talking one day to some people who said they believed in God, but He said to them: "You are children of your father, the devil; and you do what your father wants you to do. He has always been a murderer, and will have nothing to do with the truth, because he is not truthful himself. When he lies, it is just

like his nature, because he is a liar and inspires others to lie too” (John 8:44). So if some people are children of the devil, then they are certainly not Christians, and are not my brothers or sisters! Only God’s children (true Christians) are my brothers and sisters, because God’s Word, the Bible, says I am a son of God.

2. Not everyone who lives in a Christian country or who is born in a Christian family is a Christian

When I was in Fiji some years ago I spoke to a Muslim who honestly believed that everyone in New Zealand was a Christian (“because New Zealand is a Christian country”) and he didn’t want to become a Christian because of all the sin and immorality in New Zealand – “and if that’s what a Christian is, then I don’t want to become one”, he said. I explained to him that there are very few **true** Christians in New Zealand and this is why the country has so much evil in it – because the vast majority of the people have never experienced the life-transforming power of God which changes their lives and makes them Christians. The Bible says: “To everyone who receives Jesus and believes in His Name, He gives the power (authority) to become children of God; this does not happen because we are born of Christian parents, or because someone wants us to become a Christian – it is something only God can do” (John 1:12-13). Being born in a hospital does not make me a doctor, and having a father who is a doctor does not, in itself, make me a doctor either; it is something that I have to do of my own choice. So it is with becoming a Christian.

3. Not everyone who goes to church is a Christian

Jesus once talked to a man who was a church leader of his day, and He said something to him that really surprised him. Jesus said that being a church leader was not enough: “Listen”, He said, “Unless a person is re-born, he cannot see God’s Kingdom. In fact, unless a person has a spiritual re-birth He cannot enter Heaven” (John 3:3, 5).

Many people have said to me: “The church is full of hypocrites”. If, by this statement, they mean that there are lots of people in the church who are not true Christians, and so are not living the Christian life, then I would certainly agree. Many people go to church from completely wrong motives: because it is the thing to do, because people expect it, because of habit, to keep up appearances, to ease their conscience, because of what people would say if they stopped. These are not the reasons a true Christian goes to church. I can spend all my spare time at rugby matches, but this does not make me a footballer; nor does going to church make me a Christian.

4. Not everyone who “believes in God” is a Christian

A lot of people say that they believe in God, as if that automatically makes them a Christian. But the word “believe” can mean either of two things: it can mean merely an intellectual acceptance of something, or it can mean not only this, but such a deep and practical belief that it changes a person’s life. James 2:19 says “It is good that you believe that there is one God, but even devils believe this – and tremble with fear!” Evil spirits know that there is a God, and this causes them to tremble with fear – but they don’t do anything about that knowledge: it is merely a fact that they know to be true. And many people intellectually believe in God in this same way, and it has virtually no effect on them at all! I “believe” in communism, in the sense that I know it exists, and that it is a powerful force in a few parts of the world today, but I certainly don’t follow it! On the other hand, I believe in God, and this belief has completely changed my life.

5. Not everyone who leads a good life is a Christian

I have talked to a lot of people who have said that they try to live a good life and so they think they will get to Heaven. Sometimes I have asked them: “How good do you have to

be to get to Heaven?" The Bible says that there is **no sin at all** in Heaven and so if we have only committed one sin, that is enough to keep us out. Jesus set the standard, and He said: "Be perfect, just as God is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). No one (except Christ Himself) has ever lived a perfect life, so obviously our few "good deeds" are not enough. Some people think that if our "good deeds" outweigh the bad ones, then we'll be all right. But imagine a judge in court: if a person steals, commits violence and murder, on one day of the year, the judge cannot let the man go free just because he is good for the rest of the year! If he did, then he would be giving him a licence to sin; neither can God forget our sins because we have some good points. All sin must be punished.

Imagine some trampers who are caught in the hills with a wild, deep river flowing between them and their camp. The river is wide, but they decide to try to jump it. The first one tries, but falls hopelessly short of the mark, and is swept away by the river. The second does much better, but still falls short and drowns too. The last one takes a long run, and jumps as far as he can possibly go – he almost makes it, and clutches at some grass at the edge of the opposite bank, but it gives way and he too falls to a watery grave. The last man was good at jumping – he almost made it, but his fate was the same as the others who missed by a long way. And so it is with Heaven – one sin, no matter how small, will keep you out. Revelation 21:8 says "Those who are cowards, the faithless, obscene, murderers, immoral people, those who practise spiritism or witchcraft, those who worship idols, and all liars will be cast into Hell". Notice that the fate of a person who lies, is the same as that of a murderer. God is perfect, and so is Heaven – there is no room for any sin at all.

In the same way, taking Communion (or Mass), being baptised, or confessing to a priest is not sufficient to make us a Christian. Ephesians 2:8-10 says something very

important; notice the order of the words very carefully: "We are saved by God's grace (His loving favour) which we receive by faith. This is not something we can do ourselves – it is God's gift to us. We cannot earn it by our good works, or else we would boast. We are made by God, and created in Christ to do good works and to lead good lives." We are saved **BY GOD'S GRACE**, which is received **THROUGH FAITH** and we become Christians so that we might **DO GOOD WORKS**. Our good works and godly lives follow as a result of us becoming Christians – they do not make us Christians.

This naturally leads to the question: then how can anyone be saved, and become a Christian?

What is a true Christian?

Once again my answers come straight from the Bible: this is not what I think a Christian is, or what I would like a Christian to be, nor is it what most people think a Christian is; this is what God says a person must do to become a Christian. As we said before, a true Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ and this is what **He** says we must do:-

1. Believe: *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"* (Acts 16:31)

As mentioned above, this belief is not merely an intellectual acceptance of the facts about Jesus, but a personal and practical committal of your life to Him. We must believe that He died to pay the penalty for our sins, and that He is willing to forgive us for them, if we will ask Him. (See also John 3:16 and Hebrews 11:6)

2. Repent: *"Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven"* (Acts 2:38)

To repent means to completely turn about – once we lived a selfish, sinful, self-centred life; now we commit our life completely to God and follow Him. It means to be truly sorry for all our sin and be determined, with

God's help, to turn from it. This may involve making restitution to someone we have wronged. It will certainly mean a changed life (see Matthew 3:1-12).

3. Confess sin: *"If we confess our sins, God is reliable and trustworthy and will forgive our sins and wash us from all evil"* (1 John 1:9)

Remember that confessing sin is sheer hypocrisy and an insult to God if we do not mean to turn from that sin. And God knows whether or not you mean it! But when God forgives, He also forgets it! (See Jeremiah 31:34)

4. Receive Christ: *"Jesus came to His own people, but they did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, He gave the right to become God's children – Christians"* (John 1:11-12)

We must ask Christ to come into our life, not only to take away past sin, but also to change us so that we might live the right sort of lives in the future. (See Revelation 3:20 and 2 Corinthians 5:17)

5. Acknowledge Christ: *"If you say with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10:9)

We must acknowledge to other people that Jesus has now become our Lord and Saviour – that we are now Christians. (See also Matthew 10:32-33). Notice that if Jesus is to be our Lord, then we must be obedient to Him!

6. Persevere: *"He who endures to the end will be saved"* (Matthew 24:13)

We must continue on in the Christian life. If we later turn our back on our Christian life, if we deny Christ and all He has meant to us, and forsake our Christian life, then we can no longer truthfully call ourselves Christians. However, there is no reason why this should happen: God will give us the power to persevere throughout the whole of our life, if we are willing to follow Him. (See also Hebrews 6:4-8 and Revelation 2:10)

Probably a lot of what you have just read will be quite new to you – although it is actually nearly 2000 years since it was written in the Bible! Perhaps, after reading this, you realize that you have never really been a true Christian at all, but would like to become one. This is how you can: we have said that a true Christian is one who believes that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, and that God raised Him from the dead; the true Christian is sincerely sorry for his sin and is willing to turn from it; he confesses his sin to God and asks His forgiveness and also invites Jesus Christ to come into his life and make him a child of God; finally he is prepared to witness for Christ and make Him Lord of his life.

If you believe this, and would like to become a true Christian, you can pray right now and ask Christ into your life. You might like to make up your own prayer, or you can pray the following prayer; remember that it is the sincerity of your heart before God that is important.

"Lord I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and that you have raised Him from the dead. I am truly sorry for my sins and ask your forgiveness, and for your power to turn from all my evil ways. Please come into my life now and make me a child of God. Please help me to witness for Christ and make Him Lord of my life. I thank you Lord, in Jesus' Name, Amen."

"If we confess our sins, God will forgive our sins and wash us clean" – 1 John 1:9. "I write this to you who believe in Jesus, the Son of God, so that you might know that you have eternal life through Him" – 1 John 5:13. "The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts and confirms to us that we are truly children of God" – Romans 8:16.

What next?

What are the next steps after becoming a Christian? There are five main things that it is important for a Christian to do, right through life:

1. Read the Bible daily: I suggest that you get a modern translation and read the Gospel of John first. (See the last page for how you can get a free Gospel of John). After reading John, read through the rest of the New Testament, in order.

2. Pray each day: Thank God for all He has done for you, ask His forgiveness for everything you may have done wrong that day, and pray for the needs of other people, as well as your own needs.

3. Go to a good evangelical church – one where you feel at home, the people are friendly and the Word of God is really preached. Make Christian friends and seek their help and advice.

4. Obey God whatever He tells you. God may speak to you through His Word, the Bible, or through Christian friends, or during a time of prayer. Always be obedient.

5. Witness for Christ. Tell your friends and others what Christ has done for you. Tell them how they too can become Christians.
