

What Is a Christian? - Part 2

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the essence of being a Christian as a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, distinct from mere religious observance.

Scripture: Proverbs 23:26, Acts 26:14, Romans 14:11, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 3:8

Topics: "Personal Relationship with Christ", "The Nature of True Christianity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the essence of being a Christian through the transformative experience of Saul of Tarsus, emphasizing that true Christianity is deeply personal and rooted in a relationship with Jesus Christ. He highlights that while Saul's conversion was dramatic, the principles of personal encounter with Christ apply to all believers, who must recognize God's individual concern for them. Sparks contrasts religion with a genuine relationship with Christ, asserting that being a Christian is not about religious practices but about one's response to Jesus as Lord and Savior. He warns that rejecting or ignoring Christ carries eternal consequences, urging listeners to embrace a living relationship with Him. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a heartfelt commitment to Christ, who knows each of us by name.

Transcript

"Thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

"I heard a voice saying unto me... Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 26:14).

The above words, spoken to the same man - Saul of Tarsus, later Paul the Apostle - in the first case by a ruler under the Roman Empire, in the second case by Jesus of Nazareth, contain the essentials of a true Christian experience. This Paul was a truly typical Christian, both in the way in which he became one, and in his life as one. While there may not be many who become Christians with the same form or accompaniments of their conversion: we may not have been smitten to the ground by a blinding light as we went on some journey, and heard an audible voice from heaven calling us by name: yet the principles are always the same. Let us look into these words for the principles.

1. Something Absolutely Personal

"I heard a voice saying unto me... Saul, Saul..." There were others travelling with Saul on that day; how many, we do not know. Paul speaks of them as "all" - "when we were all fallen to the ground." It would seem that there were quite a number. But Saul was singled out, and what happened was so directly

personal that it was as though he were the only man on the earth. He ever afterward spoke of his experience as something extremely personal. The amazing thing to him was that Christ knew him by name, and knew all that was going on inside him.

It is a fact, and a fact which we must realise, that God has a personal and direct interest in us, and a very personal concern for us. The writer had a friend who visited military hospitals. He always carried in his pocket some texts to leave with men who might be in need of a little bit of God's Word. Before starting out he used to pray that he might be guided to give the right text to the right man.

On one of these visits, when entering a ward, he looked around, and up in the corner was a bed with a form bandaged so completely that only nose, mouth and ears were uncovered. He was about to approach the bed when the nurse said that it was useless - the man was too far gone to be spoken to. He paused a minute, and then decided to leave a text on the bandaged hands. This he did, without looking to see what the text was. As he was moving away from the bed, a muffled voice said,

'What's that?'

'Oh,' said my friend, 'it is only a little bit of God's Word.'

'What does it say?' asked the dying man.

'Let me see - yes, here it is, Proverbs 23: 26. It says: "My son, give me thy heart".'

'Who said that?' asked the soldier.

'That is from God's Word - the Bible!'

'Read it again,' said the wounded man.

"My son, give me thy heart".'

Silence for a moment, and then -

'Did you say that is in the Bible?'

'Yes, and God says it to you.'

The soldier heaved a sigh, but there was a question in the sigh. My friend waited a moment and then asked what was perplexing or surprising him.

'Look at the card over my bed,' said the soldier.

My friend did so, and was amazed to read, on the card giving his Army particulars, the name

JACK MYSON

Do you say 'Accident!' 'Coincidence!?' That man was about to pass into eternity, and God spoke to him by name. Again, it may not always be in just the same way; but the fact remains that God has a personal concern for each one of us, and a true Christian is one who has come to have such a personal relationship with God as to make it possible for him - or her - to say, as did Paul:

"He loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

"I heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul..."

Then Saul came to realise that his inner history was all known to Christ. The other people could see what was going on outwardly. He was going in hot haste to Damascus. He had certain documents authorising him to arrest Christians and take them bound to Jerusalem. He was doing his business with a will, and those other people would put it down to his religious zeal. But there was One above who knew something else. He disclosed that knowledge when He said -

"It is hard for thee to kick against the goad." (Acts 26:14).

So, really, he was like an ox harnessed to a plough, which, unwilling to go in a certain direction, and being goaded against its wishes, was letting out in rebellion, and kicking against the goad. What a different picture this was from what others would have had of him, and how different from what he was trying to make himself believe! But that One above knows things that we are not prepared to admit or accept. He sees through us, through all our pretensions and self-deceptions and resistance.

Saul was striving desperately to establish the falsehood of Christ and Christianity, but the truth was that he was not so sure of himself as he had hoped. Something had touched him, and it would have been fatal to his position if he had given that something a chance. So he had to gird himself up and resist with all his might. Inwardly he was kicking, in effect saying, 'I don't want Christ! I won't have Christ! I am not going to be a Christian!'

Well, Christ is a reality, and sooner or later we shall have to have Him. There are different times and ways in which that may be.

We can have Him now, as our Lord and our Saviour, and, like Paul, enjoy a life of wonderful fellowship with Him and useful service for Him.

Or we might have Him at the end of our life, whether that be sooner or later. But that will mean the unspeakable regret and grief that we have no life of service to lay at His feet - an eternally forfeited life of fellowship with Him in the great purpose with which He is now occupied.

Or, alas, when this life is past, we shall have to have Him - not as our Advocate and Friend, but as our Judge.

God has determined that eventually "every knee shall bow" to His Son, but His desire is that it shall be as it was with Saul: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is what it means to be a Christian. But there is yet more in the words that we have quoted at the head of this chapter.

2. Christianity - Not a Religion, but a Person

"Why persecutest thou me?" asked the glorified Christ. What an idea! Here was a man just going 'all out' in religious devotion. So far as his reason was concerned (even if his heart had some lurking and bothering question), he was convinced that he ought to do this thing in the interests of religion. He was really a divided man inside, but in his zeal for traditional religion, and, as he would have argued, for God's sake, he was suppressing every question and relentlessly forcing himself on. And yet, all the time, he was working against God, against God's Son, and against Heaven! What a state of confusion!

Much could be said about this: as to the difference between being religious and being a genuine Christian; as to how it is possible for people to be passionately devout and devoted to what they believe to be of God - or for God - and yet to be rather obstructing His real interests by that very devotion. But we must resolve it all into one inclusive issue.

A Christian is not a person who is religious, either more or less. A Christian is not a person who has taken on a lot of 'dos' and 'do nots'. God is not going to deal with us on these grounds. Neither is He going to judge men on the basis of the number or nature of their sins. He has one basis of judgment, than which any other basis would be unfair, because everyone, by his or her birth, upbringing, advantages, temperament, and so on, would be either favoured or otherwise. That one basis of judgment is, and will be: What are we doing with God's Son, Jesus Christ?

God sent His Son, and by Him we are all brought to a common position. He is presented as God's appointed Lord and Saviour for all men. God will never say in the judgment, 'How many sins did you commit?' 'What kind of sins did you commit?' - but, 'What did you do with My Son?' It is not necessary to be violent in our rejection, or actively and vehemently to fight against Christ, as did Saul. We can - with exactly the same eternal loss - just reject Him; say 'No' and close ourselves to Him; or simply ignore Him. We are lost just the same. There is no need to dash to the ground the saving medicine in order to perish. It is only necessary to leave it where it is and not take it. But it is a terrible responsibility to have known that it was there, and to have just failed to take it.

We see, then, that all questions of life and death, sin and righteousness, Heaven and Hell, time and eternity, are bound up - not with 'religion', 'church', 'creed' - but with a living relationship to the Son of God; and a Christian is one who has himself come into such a living relationship, and has found all these questions answered in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hast thou heard Him, seen Him, known Him?

Is not thine a captured heart?

Chief among ten thousand own Him,

Joyful choose the better part.

Idols, once they won thee, charmed thee

Lovely things of time and sense.

Gilded thus does sin disarm thee,

Honeyed, lest thou turn thee thence.

What has stripped the seeming beauty

From the idols of the earth?

Not a sense of right or duty,

But the sight of peerless worth.

Not the crushing of those idols,

With its bitter void and smart;
But the beaming of His beauty,
The unveiling of His heart.
Who extinguishes their taper
Till they hail the rising sun?
Who discards the garb of winter
Till the summer has begun?
'Tis that look that melted Peter,
'Tis that face that Stephen saw,
'Tis that heart that wept with Mary,
Can alone from idols draw
Draw and win and fill completely,
Till the cup o'erflow the brim:
What have we to do with idols
Who have companied with Him?
Anon.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/what-is-a-christian-part-2/>

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