

CHAPTER 19

HOW TO KNOW WHETHER YOU ARE A REAL CHRISTIAN OR NOT

⁵Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? 2 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV)

Paul tells us that we need to *examine ourselves* to see whether we really are Christians or not. Note that he said that in a letter written to the church in Corinth. It wasn't written to unbelievers. So, Paul did not assume that people in churches must automatically be Christians. We cannot make that assumption either, whether in relation to others or ourselves.

We need to pause therefore and look at how to find out whether you are already a real Christian. This book may come into the hands of all sorts of people, of different levels of knowledge and understanding and from many different backgrounds. You may not necessarily know what you are and whether you have started out on "*the Way*" and become a Christian, or still need to do so. In other words, you may be confused about exactly where you stand.

Some people are obviously not Christians. They may be atheists or followers of some other religion. If that's you, you will know quite clearly that you have never genuinely repented or believed in Jesus Christ and that you are not "on the way".

Other people may be quite certain that they are a Christian and with good reason. They know very clearly where they stand, what they believe, and that they have truly repented.

There is probably a much larger group in the middle who are unsure what they are. Perhaps that's you? You may have been brought up in church, or made a decision to follow Jesus Christ years ago, but perhaps you have not kept it up. Perhaps you never quite realised what you were doing when you made that decision?

Or you may be nominally Christian by background, or family connection, but are living in a lukewarm, compromised way. Or perhaps there is active ongoing sin in your life which you know is wrong, but you have never tackled it. You may have been to church all your life, but you don't feel any certainty as to what you are. Maybe your church is wishy-washy, with no clear teaching or preaching about the real gospel?

Possibly you are unsure whether you have ever really repented, or whether you have genuinely believed in Jesus Christ or given your life to him. If any of these things apply to you, it may be that you don't know whether you are saved already, or still need to be saved.

People can find it very difficult to pin some of these things down and they can be very vague. However, before you can take the step of becoming a Christian, you need to be able to know for sure where you stand now, and exactly what you are at the moment.

If you are not yet a genuine Christian, and your sins have not yet been forgiven, then you do not have eternal life, no matter how many times you have been to church. Thus, you would need to make a clear and definite step now to become a Christian and to start out on the way.

There is no single test that will, by itself, show whether you are already a real Christian. However, I will now list many different questions or tests that you can apply to yourself. Go through them all, one, by one and carefully answer them as honestly as you can. Each question, on its own, will not be

conclusive proof in either direction. But, taken together, if you weigh up the overall pattern that emerges, you will probably find that most of your responses are pointing in the same direction.

If so, then that is probably your answer. However, if the answers are a confusing mixture, then the safest thing to do is to assume that you are not yet a real Christian. If so, then take the necessary steps to make your position completely certain. This is much too important to leave to chance or to let it remain vague and uncertain.

If you are a person who goes to church or was brought up in church I would urge you not to be complacent just because of that. It may be that what you experienced of church was far removed from real, biblical Christianity. Millions of people all over the world are in churches, even genuine churches, but they are not necessarily real Christians themselves.

Therefore please consider all of the following questions honestly and carefully. Don't be too quick to answer. Ask God to open your eyes and to help you to be brutally frank with yourself. There is no point pretending. You would only be fooling yourself.

A series of questions to help you to diagnose whether or not you are a real Christian at present:

Question 1

Does the question of whether you are already a real Christian bother you? Or, are you unconcerned and complacent about it?

A= You are unconcerned/relaxed about it.

B = It's important to you and you want to be sure

Question 2

Can you point to a specific day or a moment of decision or commitment when you first became a Christian? Or, is it vague? It may be that it is unclear because you have been brought up in a Christian home and you became a Christian so young that you simply cannot remember the day when you first made the decision to follow Jesus Christ. However, even if that is so, was there ever a day later in life, as you grew up, where you made a conscious recommitment, or confirmed that decision?

A= You can't think of any specific day when you ever made a clear decision to become a Christian or to recommit yourself

B = You can think of the day/time/place very clearly

Question 3

Is there an emphasis on repentance in your thinking and prayers? Is your own sin, as opposed to other people's sin, significant to you? Does it concern you? Do you spend much time thinking about your own sins, selfishness and pride? Do you ever feel convicted in your conscience about those sins?

A= In your life there is little or no emphasis on, or thinking about, your own sin or repentance

B = There is substantial and regular emphasis on your own sin and your own need for repentance

Question 4

Can you point to a day or a time when you first knowingly and consciously repented of your own sins?

A= There is no specific day when you can remember repenting

B = You can remember a specific day when you first repented

Question 5

If so, did you deal with specific sins that were real, or was it just vague and non-specific? Did you get down to brass tacks and repent of actual sins?

A= It wasn't specific and you didn't get down to brass tacks about your own particular sins

B = It was specific and you did deal with real sins, not just vague generalities

Question 6

When you read or hear verses from the Bible which describe sin, do you assume it is talking about other people or about you? Do you tend immediately to think of other people who commit those sins, or do you usually recognise that those sins are in you and that you need to change?

A= When you read or hear of sins you tend to assume the Bible is referring to other people. You think of instances where other people commit those sins, rather than yourself.

B = You tend to assume the Bible is speaking about your sins and you easily recognise those sins or faults in yourself.

Question 7

Can you point to any significant/meaningful ways in which, since you decided to repent, you have turned from your sins and genuinely changed your lifestyle and behaviour? For example have you ever stopped doing something like lying, stealing, looking at pornography etc? Is there something specific that has ever changed or stopped?

A= There has not been any significant change of lifestyle or behaviour

B = Your behaviour / lifestyle has changed noticeably and you can think of specific sins you have stopped or reduced

Question 8

Have you ever, even for a moment, felt grieved over your own sinfulness? Have you ever felt remorse and conviction about it? Or, even as you read these words now, does that sound alien to you? Do you even understand, from personal experience, what is meant by such words as 'remorse' and 'conviction'?

If you have never felt remorse or conviction, then, it is very unlikely that you have ever truly repented. And, if you cannot ever remember feeling those things, then you probably never have felt them. It is not something that you could easily forget. After you become a Christian the continued cravings that you still feel to engage in sin are a cause of turmoil. It disturbs and unsettles you. The famous seventeenth century puritan writer, John Owen, said "*Sin in the believer is a burden which afflicts him, rather than a pleasure which delights him*".

- A= No you have never felt grief/anguish remorse/conviction about your sin. Or, you have felt such things only very rarely/slightly.
- B = Yes you have felt those things significantly and were deeply troubled by them.

Question 9

Do you find that you have a desire to read the Bible? Is it alive and interesting to you? Do you find it precious and valuable? Alternatively, is it dry and boring to you? Do you rarely look at it, or even avoid it? If you are a real Christian then one of the signs is that the Bible ought to be fresh, living and active to you. God will speak to you through it and continually reveal new things to you. If you are not yet a real Christian, then the Bible is likely to be burdensome to read and irksome to you. It will feel like a dull duty, not a pleasure.

- A= The Bible is dry/dull/boring and an effort to read and you find it hard to understand. You tend to avoid reading it or you read it rarely.
- B = The Bible is alive /fresh/ interesting and you want to read it every day and keep finding new things in it. You read it regularly.

Question 10

Do you clearly understand and accept the point that I have been emphasising in this book so far, i.e. that you have got no merit, righteousness or virtue in yourself and that you can never earn your way into Heaven? Or, do those words seem odd to you? Do they jar against your assumptions about yourself, because you basically feel that you are a good person?

- A= You feel you do have quite a lot of merit and goodness and that you do expect to get into Heaven because you're better than many other people.
- B = You genuinely grasp the fact that you have no righteousness at all in yourself and that your own good deeds can never get you into Heaven.

Question 11

Have you ever asked God for His mercy? Has it ever even occurred to you that you need His mercy?

- A= You have never asked for mercy and/or have never felt you needed it.
- B = You have asked for God's mercy and you know you need it.

Question 12

Do you understand the concept of Jesus dying in your place to take the penalty for your sin and of His righteousness being transferred to you and your sin being transferred to Him? Or, is that a new and strange idea to you as you read it now?

A= The idea seems odd/strange and you don't really get it or see why Jesus died on the cross or what it has to do with you and your sins.

B = It makes sense to you why Jesus died and you can see how His being sacrificed works and why there is no other way to deal with your sin

Question 13

Do you still think in terms of getting into Heaven based on being a good person, or, at least, on being a person who is more good than bad? Do you think, in broad terms, of balancing your good deeds against your bad deeds and hoping that you have been a good enough person?

A= You do think in terms of trying to be a good enough person to get into Heaven. You do see it in terms of weighing scales, and you hope your good deeds will outweigh your bad ones.

B = You realise that it is futile even to think in those terms. You are therefore relying solely on Jesus' death in your place as the payment for your sins, not on trying to be a good person.

Question 14

Have you ever felt the "*fear of the Lord*"? If God's judgment is mentioned, do you ever tremble, and feel apprehensive? Or, are you quite carefree and relaxed about that? Are you able to shrug casually at the idea of God's judgment as if it did not affect you?

A= You don't feel much, if any, fear of God. It doesn't make much sense to you and isn't a factor in your life. Judgment by God doesn't worry you and you don't really think about it.

B = Yes, you understand and you do fear God and His judgment. You have known what it is to tremble at the prospect of His judgment.

Question 15

Are you, at the moment, involved in any known and obvious sin which you have chosen to continue in? I am not referring simply to the ordinary day to day ways in which we all fail by losing our temper or being impatient or selfish towards other people in minor ways. Those things are bad, and I am not excusing them, but such things will happen even in the lives of genuine believers. I am referring to more sinister actions and thoughts, such as lying, stealing, manipulation, deviousness and also sexual sin, such as adultery or sex outside of marriage.

If you are involved in such things then it is more difficult to see how you can ever have truly repented and become a Christian. Repentance is the first and most crucial ingredient of becoming a Christian. Therefore, you would already have recognised and begun to deal with such sins if you had ever truly

repented. Certainly, you would not be able to justify to yourself continuing in such sins if you were a true believer. At the very least you would feel wretched about it, due to the strong sense of conviction at your own wrongdoing.

Yet, it would be perfectly possible to commit such sins quite happily if you are a shallow, superficial or nominal believer. I have come across countless people in churches whose lives involve blatant ongoing sins of that type. I should emphasise that I am not saying that a real Christian can never commit such a sin. They can. It is simply that if they do, they will be wracked with conviction and are likely to repent of it afterwards. If you commit such sins and do not feel convicted to repent and stop, then that is a strong sign that you are not a real Christian.

- A= You are involved in specific sins and they don't trouble you. You don't worry about them and you're not seeking to stop. You're content as you are.
- B = There have been specific sins but you have stopped them. Or, where such sins continue, you feel convicted of the need to stop and you are seeking to stop.

Question 16

Are you pretentious? Do you wear a "mask" or put on an act when you are with others? Are you two-faced? Are the private things that you say and do different from the public way in which you try to portray yourself? In other words, are you false/phoney/playacting in the way you live? Many people in churches are kidding themselves and others about what they really are.

If you are a real Christian and have truly repented, then God will work in your heart to take away from you any desire to be false or pretentious. At any rate, if you were doing such things, then you would be convicted and would feel a desire to stop it. If however you feel comfortable about being false/phoney, and justify yourself for being those things, then that is a very bad sign.

- A= Yes, you are two-faced and phoney. You pretend to be things that you aren't and to have attitudes that you don't really have. You wear a mask to impress people and to hide what you really are.
- B = You are not two-faced, or you have stopped being so. You now seek to be sincere, honest and real and are making progress.

Question 17

Do you ever feel a longing for holiness i.e. to be clean and pure and to more closely resemble Jesus Christ's character? Do you ever ask God to change you and to reduce your sin and increase your godliness and holiness?

- A= No, you don't feel any such longing. You don't really understand what it means to long to be holy as God is holy. You're content as you are.
- B = Yes, you do long for holiness and for God to help you to change. You can identify with what is being referred to here.

Question 18

Do you feel a hatred for sin and long for it to be removed from, or reduced in, your life and character?

- A= No, you don't feel any hatred for your sin, or very little. At least you do not hate the sin in yourself, only the sin in other people.
- B = Yes, you do increasingly hate your own sin and long to remove/reduce it in your own life.

Question 19

Do you long for Jesus Christ to return to the earth? Do you hope and pray for the day when He returns and brings this present age to an end and takes His place as King?

- A= No, you don't really ever think about His return, or at least you don't hope and pray for it
- B = Yes, you do hope for His return to the earth and long for Him to take up His place as King.

Question 20

Do you reject this world's system and its godless ways? Do the proud, vain, selfish, manipulative, grasping values and standards of this world seem very wrong to you? Do you want to keep out of some of the things that go on at work or in society?

- A= No, you feel pretty comfortable with the values and lifestyles of our society and it doesn't bother you. You don't reject or renounce its values. You feel you fit in well with this world.
- B = Yes, you feel uncomfortable with much of what goes on and often feel uneasy about things that people do or say as you work/live alongside them. You do reject this world's system and its values.

Question 21

Do you ever worry about or pray for the salvation of other people. Do you ever feel the reality of their "lostness" and their desperate need to know Jesus Christ? Does it concern you that otherwise they will go to Hell and then the Lake of Fire after they die?

- A= No, you don't feel any anxiety about those things or identify with any of that. Those things don't seem real to you.
- B = Yes, you do sometimes feel those anxieties and feel burdened to pray for family and friends to come to know Jesus.

Question 22

Have you ever told anybody that you are a Christian? Have you ever told anybody what the gospel is, or at least wanted to do so, but felt too afraid? Or, are you unconcerned about your duty to tell other people about Jesus and/or ashamed of being identified with Jesus Christ?

A= No, you haven't told anybody you are a Christian or what the gospel is. And/or you feel ashamed at being identified with Jesus Christ

B = Yes, you have told people you are a Christian and have told them the gospel too. You don't feel ashamed of Jesus Christ. Or, even if you do, you force yourself to speak about Him anyway.

Question 23

Have you ever experienced any persecution, ridicule, hostility or opposition from any non-Christians or nominal Christians, due to them objecting to your Christian views, values, or behaviour?

A= No, nobody objects to any of your beliefs, values or behaviour on the basis of you being too Christian.

B = Yes, you have experienced such anti-Christian opposition/hostility on one or more occasions.

Question 24

Have you ever been baptised in water, not just as a baby, but at an age when you were old enough to know what you were doing and why? In other words, have you ever been properly baptised as a believer?

A= No, you have never been properly baptised in water. If you have been baptised, it was only as a baby. Or, you did get baptised when you were older, but you didn't really mean it or understand it properly.

B = Yes, you have been properly baptised in water. You were aware of what you were doing and you really meant it.

Question 25

Have you ever received (or been filled with, or baptised in) the Holy Spirit in such a way that you were aware of it? Was it an unmistakable event because you spoke in tongues or began to operate in any of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit?

A= No, you have never knowingly received (or been filled with/baptised in) the Holy Spirit. You are not able to point to any occasion when anything of that nature has ever occurred. Or, you have always been told that you automatically received the Holy Spirit at your confirmation or when you first believed and repented. Or you've never given this question any thought at all and have no idea whether you have ever received the Holy Spirit

B = Yes, you have received the Holy Spirit and you can point to the occasion when it happened. You know that things changed and you spoke in tongues or prophesied or you have operated in some other gifts of the Holy Spirit since then.

Question 26

If you believe you are a Christian, can you look closely at your own life and point to any "fruit" that it has produced? Remember, we saw earlier that fruit is what God looks for to see whether we are real. Can you see a pattern of your life increasingly making a positive difference in the lives of others? Are you a blessing to the poor, the homeless, the lost, the old, the helpless, the sick, the hungry etc etc? Has your life made any difference to the lives of such people? Is the world now a better place for you being in it? Are you salt and light in some way to the people you know?

A= No, you don't really do anything for any such people. Or, if you do, it's at a small level and has not been increasing. It is similar to what any typical unbeliever might do or give. Your life hasn't made any part of the world a better place and your life hasn't touched or affected the lives of any other people around you. In short, you cannot really see any fruit from your life.

B = Yes, you have been increasingly effective and active in doing, giving, helping, caring and volunteering, and also in influencing others. You have increasingly met the physical, financial and spiritual needs of other people and you find you want to do so more and more. In short, you can see fruit growing in your life.

Question 27

What is the position with your money and your financial giving? Do you give your money away on an increasingly large scale? Do you get a real pleasure from giving to the poor or supporting the preaching of the gospel? Or, do you resent, avoid and resist giving your money away? When you give money away, is it done with coins or is it with notes and cheques? (assuming you are wealthy enough to have notes and cheques, which many people are not).

In short, are you generous? In my experience, though I can never be sure what is in another person's heart, or what their real motives are, I have noticed that financial generosity is one of the clearest tests of what a person really is. Financial giving is one of the main 'fruits' God is looking for from your life. That is one reason why Jesus had so much to say about money and about not being in love with it.

The way you are with your money is a very clear test of whether you are a real Christian or not. Real Christians will, almost always, find their hearts getting more and more tender about the needs of the poor and about the importance of supporting God's work in churches, charities and so on. If you enjoy giving and look forward to it, that's a good sign. If you don't and, instead, you avoid giving and minimise it, or even resent it, then I would question whether you are a real Christian. That is especially true if you are not just a brand new convert but have been a believer for years.

In my experience, stinginess, i.e. being mean with money, is one of the surest signs that a person has no real relationship with God and that they do not have the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. Moreover, I have observed that financially stingy people almost always have a range of other deep problems. In particular, they tend to have hard and callous hearts. That is not consistent with being a real Christian.

A= No, you don't really give much money away. You don't enjoy giving money away either and you try to avoid it or minimise it. You feel your money is your own and that

B = Yes, you enjoy giving money away and you have been giving away more and more. Your heart is getting more and more tender about the needs of the poor, the

you need it all and deserve to keep it.

sick, the elderly and the lost etc. You see your money as God's money rather than as your own.

Conclusion

I have been through many different factors in the numbered paragraphs above. The list is not exhaustive. There are many other things that you could ask yourself. It may be that God will bring such questions to mind now, especially if you ask Him to.

The key is to go through the above list one by one and to be really frank and truthful with yourself about where you stand. Which direction are your answers mainly pointing in?

Do all or most of them point in the direction of you never having truly repented and handed over your life to Jesus Christ? Do they mostly show that there has been no real change of heart and of behaviour and priorities in your life? Is there little or no sign of fruit growing from your life? If so, then you are probably not really a Christian at all, no matter how many times you have been to church.

If most or all of your answers are option A than that strongly suggests that you are *not* a real Christian. If you have only or mainly ticked B then that would suggest to me that you are a real Christian, provided you weren't just fooling yourself, which a lot of people do.

Were you just ticking box B automatically, simply because you "wanted to get the answer right", even where it was not a true reflection of your life? If so, then do the test again more carefully and thoughtfully. However, this test is only a guide. You need to pray and ask for God's guidance and, ideally, speak to a genuine and mature Christian to seek further advice.

There is another type of person who tends to tick box A too readily. They are overly harsh with themselves, seeing no growth or progress even when it is really there. This is a small minority, especially in the Western churches in this apostate age. However such people do exist and so I mention this in case you are one.

People in this sub-category suffer from having excessive scruples. They are so honest that they are too quick to believe that any passage in the Bible which condemns sin or wrong attitudes is relevant to them and aimed at them. They see themselves as one of the least fruitful, least committed, least godly people in the church. In fact, they are usually the opposite.

Such a person is very prone to hear the accusing whispers of a demon. Therefore they are easily robbed of their assurance of salvation. They will therefore tick box A wrongly, when they ought to tick box B. It is the exact opposite of the self-satisfied, complacent person who casually ticks box B every time, when he has no valid basis for doing so.

So, if you feel you may belong to this sub-group and you have ticked box A many times, even though you have a sincere desire to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow Him, then go and take advice from a mature fellow believer or leader. Consider whether your answers involve too many 'false negatives' That said, such people are rare nowadays.

Perhaps your answers were a mixture? It may be, therefore, that the genuineness of your conversion is in doubt. If that is so, then take the opportunity now to make things certain by truly and deeply repenting and getting right with God. Do that even if you have been going to church for years.

Remember, it is not going to church that will save you, but rather a genuine repentance and a sincere belief in Jesus Christ and your whole hearted acceptance of Him as your own Lord and Saviour. Nothing else can save you. There is no other way to become a Christian.

I am reminded of a work colleague of mine in the past that I had been speaking to about the gospel. I believed that he was not yet a Christian because it seemed to me that he had no real repentance. Plus he had so many doubts about the gospel and the Bible that I felt he didn't really have saving faith either. Nonetheless, he was told by some other Christians in a church he had started attending that he definitely was a Christian already.

They were kindly people, but misguided. They saw him fretting and agonising about his doubts and about whether he really believed and was really saved. They just wanted to "help" him by enabling him to stop worrying. So they assured him he was already a Christian and that he should be confident of that and stop doubting it. So he took no further steps to become a Christian. He relied on what they told him and assumed that he was already a Christian.

From that point on he continued to go to church. But he was still troubled by the same confusion and unbelief and I felt that there was still no genuine repentance. I could see all that, but he couldn't, because someone had told him that he was a Christian and that there was no question about that. In fact, he was full of doubts and problems. He hadn't genuinely repented, believed, been baptised in water or received the Holy Spirit. Therefore, his problems just continued and increased.

It all ended in disaster. He knew in himself, and eventually said openly, that being a Christian "*wasn't working*". He had been assured by experienced people that he was a real Christian. He assumed that they must surely know what they were talking about. Oddly, even at the end, he never came to doubt *whether he really was a Christian*. He concluded instead that he *was* one, but that "*Christianity just doesn't work*". He reached that conclusion because he was in just as much of a mess as ever. In fact his problems were worse.

In the end, everything fell apart completely and he decided that he no longer even believed that there was a God! It was a tragedy brought about by bad advice given to him by well-meaning but very misguided people. These days I never tell anybody that they are a real Christian. All I do now is point them to what the Bible says a person needs to do. Then I urge them to take all four steps, (repeatedly if necessary), until they are given genuine assurance of their own salvation by the Holy Spirit.

Giving that assurance to people is the task of the Holy Spirit. It's not my place to do it, because I would probably get it wrong. So, if you already know in your heart that you are a genuine Christian and the Holy Spirit has given you that assurance, then that is wonderful.

But, if you are in any doubt at all, then you need to get right with God now. Don't put it off till later or leave it to chance. Be real with Him. Ask Him to help you now to genuinely repent and to truly become a Christian, with no doubt about it. Also go ahead and get baptised in water. Then pray to receive the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues and to prophesy and to receive the other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Why take any chances? Why leave anything in doubt? Why leave anything out? You need to know that you really are a Christian and to put it beyond all doubt.

I recently came across this poem in a book by Chuck Missler (See the section entitled 'Approved Ministries' on the Real Christianity website for details of his ministry). The poem is carved around the door frame of an old church in Germany. It was written in the sixteenth century, probably during

the Reformation. The poem takes the form of a series of (imaginary) statements by Jesus Christ about the inconsistencies in our lives between what we claim to *believe*, and what we actually *do*:

Sixteenth century German poem

*You call me eternal, then do not seek me.
You call me fair, then do not love me.
You call me gracious, then do not trust me.
You call me just, then do not fear me.
You call me life, then do not choose me.
You call me light, then do not see me.
You call me Lord, then do not respect me.
You call me Master, then do not obey me.
You call me merciful, then do not thank me.
You call me mighty, then do not honour me.
You call me noble, then do not serve me.
You call me rich, then do not ask me.
You call me Saviour, then do not praise me.
You call me shepherd, then do not follow me.
You call me Way, then do not walk with me.
You call me wise, then do not heed me.
You call me Son of God, then do not worship me.
When I sentence you, then do not blame me.*

If those words don't convict you and cause you to question yourself and seek to become more committed to Jesus then something is wrong. They are sobering words and they accurately reflect the inconsistencies, hypocrisy and shallowness that I have often seen in myself and still see, all too often.