

The Myth of the “Real Christian”

By Joe Duke



For centuries people have tried to identify the signs of a real Christian. How do we know if a person is truly born again? What do we look for in the lives of supposed Christ followers that would indicate a genuine faith? Some insist that in surveying the smorgasbord of evidence, we would find baptism, church attendance, love for others, Bible reading, and prayer. Real Christians do those things and more, they say, and abstain from a bunch of other bad stuff.

One website insists that among other things, real Christians “walk in righteousness,” “are totally dependent on Christ,” and “persevere until the end.” Still others declare that real Christians have conquered sin and are victorious over sinful thoughts and habits.

But it’s that phrase, real Christian, that I find troubling, at least in the way it’s typically used. Sentences that begin with, “A real Christian would never...” or “A real Christian always...” cause me to brace myself for what will follow. How will the person

complete that sentence that begins with the words, “A real Christian...”?

One says, “A real Christian would never listen to that music.” Or “A real Christian is always joyful.” Another says, “A real Christian never drinks alcohol.” Or “A real Christian is vegan.” Still another might say, “A real Christian doesn’t get depressed.” Or “A real Christian will never tell a lie.” Or how about, “A real Christian would never shop at Target.” Or “A real Christian feels comfortable in Target at least once a week.” And among my recent favorites are, “A real Christian would never vote Democrat,” or “A real Christian would never vote Republican.” Ugh.

People using the phrase, a real Christian, might as well be saying, I double-dog dare you. Rather than relying on the content of a cogent argument, they default to simplistic fighting words—a real Christian. Using the phrase, a real Christian, is a kind of mic drop designed to leave anyone holding an opposing view in stunned

silence. End of discussion.

But the way most people use the words, a real Christian, is fundamentally flawed. In current vernacular, that phrase is almost always tied to behavior. Real Christians do or don’t do certain things. This reliance on behavior violates the very definition of Christian salvation. A Christian is not one who behaves himself or herself into salvation or proof of conversion. We’re saved “not by works of righteousness which we have done,” but by God’s mercy (Tit. 3:5).

A Christian is simply one who, at a point in time, has believed in Jesus as the Savior who died for them, resulting in imputed righteousness and eternal life. This moment of belief may have occurred as a child at a Christian camp or as a middle-aged person in a home Bible study. Regardless, a Christian is one whose behavior has not played a part nor is currently playing a part in securing salvation and eternal life.

SHORT-TAKES

Why is our security in Christ so important?

Imagine the daughter who desires closeness with her father, but doubts she is truly his child. She daily asks, “What do I have to do to prove I’m your daughter?” The one who attempts discipleship upon a foundation of doubt is that child. It leads to the misguided notion that one must purchase God’s love through performance. This foundation results in failure in the faith or legalistic superiority. Neither is the abundant life Christ came to give nor the intimate relationship He offers. Discipleship without assurance breeds unstable disciples who are at risk of abandoning the faith or spreading Pharisaism. Security makes all the difference.

Lucas Kitchen
Free Grace International

Four steps for putting eternal security into practice:

1. Sound hermeneutics applied to exegesis leads to recognition of Biblical distinctions.
2. One important Biblical distinction is that position and practice are not the same thing.
3. Recognizing that our position is resolved—that believers have eternal life—draws us to conclude that we are eternally secure in our position in Christ.
4. Certainty of our security in Christ motivates and empowers us to walk in such a way that our practice aligns with our position.

Hermeneutics matters.

Biblical distinctions matter.

How we steward the position God gives us matters.

Christopher Cone, ThD, PhD, PhD
Agathon University

When our eternal destiny is settled, we can serve Christ with confidence, knowing we labor from acceptance, not for it.

Bob Nyberg



Assurance of salvation will always be out of reach when we add arbitrary requirements of conduct to authenticate the real christian.

What's more, let's just be honest, a Christian can look like a non-Christian and a non-Christian can look like a Christian! As we all know, outward appearances can be deceiving. While behavior is important, using it as a requirement or mark of salvation results in dismantling the offer of the gospel of grace. Grace shows up precisely because we'd never be good enough to earn or deserve our salvation.

A conversation like this one usually prompts me to ask a simple question of people: How bad can a Christian be? The biblical answer is of course, very bad. A Christian is capable of any sin. The record of the Bible reminds us that those who enjoy a relationship with God can also disobey Him. God's children can steal, lie, gossip, rage in anger, be envious, commit adultery, and even murder. Should they? Heavens no! Can they? Absolutely.

To shoehorn good works into the definition of a real Christian is to subvert the grace of God and render assurance of our salvation virtually impossible. Many people cherry pick from their own list of Christian behaviors, perhaps even personal preferences, and insist that those behaviors are required to prove one has

received this free salvation. But wait, it's free. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). And that free gift of salvation doesn't require a behavioral contribution from us. It's without cost. Salvation is "the gift of God, not of works" (Eph. 2:8-9). A gift requiring payment from the recipient is no longer a gift. Insisting on good works in order to legitimize salvation is a form of payment. And charging for that gift is a bait and switch.

Furthermore, it's not up to us to determine if someone is a real Christian. Only God knows for sure. But we would hope that the individual in question would know the amazing assurance of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. Assurance of our salvation doesn't have to be a guessing game. We can know whether or not we have believed in Jesus. It's not that complicated. But assurance of salvation will always be out of reach when we add arbitrary requirements of conduct to authenticate the real Christians.

But shouldn't every Christian seek to live for God and thereby experience a change in behavior? Of course. We are to be diligent in seeking to grow with the help of the

Holy Spirit. But the presence of biblical commands urging us to grow and mature in the faith implies that we may not. If growth is automatic, then why does God tell us to grow?

Will every Christian follow Christ in wholehearted devotion? Nope. Of course not. Some Christians displease God in thought, word, or deed. I've been guilty, and you have too. Some Christians grieve and quench the Spirit. Some Christians fail to invest their lives in ways that bring God glory. They are still Christians, but their failure to faithfully build their lives on the foundation of Christ means they will appear empty handed before Him but still be with Him forever (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

The bar for becoming a Christian is low: Believe that Jesus died for you and offers you forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The bar for living as a Christian is high: Pay the price of following Jesus as His disciple. Confuse becoming a Christian with living as one and that's when you'll add all kinds of extra requirements to becoming a Christian. Faith in Jesus will cease to be enough for salvation. The costly price of following

Jesus—living as a Christian—will now usurp the offer of the free gift of salvation—becoming a Christian. In other words, fail to distinguish salvation and discipleship, and most certainly you'll embrace the myth of the "real Christian."



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