

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

Maybe we have oversimplified and over-codified the gospel to the point that we have removed the good news (and life) from it. For too many Christians we became Christians when we ‘repented’, when we ‘received Jesus’, or when we ‘said The Prayer’. And yet, doing these things aren’t what make us Christians. If there’s something you have to do to make it work, then it’s not good news, even if it is good instruction (or advice).

Therefore, we’re not surprised that for most Christians, Christianity boils down to being ONLY about forgiveness of sins, or a personal relationship with Jesus, or a ticket to heaven... - which means that the faith is missing all the most important parts...

- *We’re missing the new WAY of LIFE that we are invited to live...*
- *We’re missing the new COMMUNITY and INTERCONNECTEDNESS in which we’re to be growing...*
- *We’re missing the new Kingdom we’re supposed to be living in and building out... here and now.*

What’s more... if being a Christian is only about forgiveness or a personal relationship or heaven, then that makes the faith all about the individual. (you feeling clean or free, you feeling good or in control, you feeling safe or superior) (And it makes God too small: he only cares about right and wrong, he’s just a peer like us, or he’s only elsewhere) Of course, this has the side effect of removing God from the faith (and too often it also removes faith from our lives as well).

That said, it still leaves us with the question: ‘What does it mean to be a Christian?’ or ‘How does one BECOME a Christian?’

HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

Some ask, ‘What do I have to do to become a Christian?’ And, depending on the denomination and the set of beliefs, there are various steps ranging from simply praying a prayer to working to become holy. But maybe this is the wrong question to ask... because it implies that there’s something you COULD do to insert yourself into the family of God.

*“For he chose us in him
before the creation of the world
to be holy and blameless in his sight.
In love he predestined us
to be adopted as his sons
through Jesus Christ,
in accordance with
his pleasure and will—
to the praise of his glorious grace,
which he has freely given us
in the One he loves.
Ephesians 1:4-6*

Maybe, a better way of looking at this is through the Biblical analogy of adoption... because it shows us the weakness of the question and provides a better way for us to understand what it means to become a Christian.

If you were to ask someone, ‘What do I have to do to become adopted?’, you would likely get a puzzled expression. Because the reality is that being adopted isn’t up to the one being adopted. It’s something that’s done to them... and done for them. Someone simply adopts this person, and then they’re a part of this new family.

In a similar way, becoming a Christian isn’t something that we do, it’s something that God did through the work of Jesus, when he adopted us into his family. And therefore, it’s not something we earn or activate or receive.

But this then leads us to a far more interesting and helpful question: 'How do we LIVE like we're a part of the family?' But before we come to that, we need to look at why we'd want (and need) to be a part of God's family in the first place.

OUR DEEP NEED: TO BELONG

There's something deep inside of us that wants to be included, to be needed, to be a part of something larger than ourselves. This deep desire is what pulls us towards others: into relationships and families, into clubs and organizations, into communities and cultures. We were built to belong.

That said, it doesn't take long for us being in community before we recognize that relationships are hard, and often we don't fit in or get along with others. What's more, we have a deep fear that we won't measure up, that we will be found unworthy, and that we will be excluded from the group. And so, we work hard at covering over our insufficiencies, hiding ourselves from others, and excluding others from these same groups.

But despite all the difficulties of community, there's still something in us that wants to be included.

Maybe our desire for belonging comes from a deeper need to be included in the family of God...

THE PROBLEM: WE DON'T FIT IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Of course, the problem is that we don't fit in the family of God. God is love, Jesus is perfect, the Holy Spirit is peace, and together they are one. And innately we recognize that we don't belong in that family.

What's more, some of our inadequacies are inherited from our families (all the way back to the beginning), and they have left us some additional baggage and scarring that further keeps us from fitting in.

In many ways, we have been born as orphans, we have been born outside of the family of God. And while that seems unfair, as we come to understand more about God, and as we realize all the ways that we fall short, we understand why we have to be excluded.

It is both God's love and justice that help explain why it wouldn't be good to allow just anyone in the family... and if we're being honest, we probably can figure out why it wouldn't be healthy or wise to allow us, in our present state, into that family either. It'd be bad for us and bad for the family.

THE GOOD NEWS

Given this predicament, it quickly becomes clear that the solution can't come from us. We can't change the way we are, and we can't correct the mess we've inherited. We can't live the perfection required to be a member of the family of God. And, what's more, we recognize that it would be equally inadequate to simply lower the standards to include us.

But the good news is that God wants us to be part of his family. And knowing that we are helpless to fix the problem, God, through the workings of the Holy Spirit, sent Jesus to bring us into the family of God.

Jesus lived the life that we couldn't live, but then he also took our sins and imperfections upon himself, on a cross, taking the punishment that we deserved. In doing this, he gives us a clean slate, he redeems us, AND, more than that, he brings us into the family of God. We are born again into the family of God through the work of Jesus.

As such, we are not just 'in' the family, but we are reborn as children of the Father with full rights and privileges. This means that God is forever with us, it means that we are heirs of the promise, it means we are recipients of the Holy Spirit. And it's by being a part of the family of God that we can finally come to know God better.

Which leads us back to our earlier question: "How do we LIVE as a member of the family of God?"

"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."
Titus 3:4-7

A WAY TO LIVE

The first thing... we need to recognize is that members of this family live a certain WAY... and it's different from how we used to live when we weren't part of this family. Therefore, as members of this new family, we turn from those old ways of living and turn towards these new ways of living. This is called repentance. We strive to behave like members of the family behave.

Our model for this new way of life is Jesus since he's the firstborn son of God. He teaches us what it looks like to be in the family: A son or daughter of God. - We call this process of learning and emulating Jesus - DISCIPLESHIP. We follow him in order to become more like him.

Of course, in order to follow him and to become like him, we have to trust him. We have to trust in his teachings, in his example, in his leading. This trust is called FAITH. And it too is a gift of God: an undeserved form of God's grace. It's not something that comes from within us, but it's something that God puts in us. That said, as we lean on him and live out this faith, we'll find that it grows in us (in the same way that as we trust good parents we learn to rely on their goodness, guidance, and love).

A COMMUNITY TO BELONG TO

Of course, it doesn't take long before we realize that we're going to need more help. Because life is hard, and challenges often come... - And so, we gather together with other sons and daughters so that we can start trying to live this out in community... so that we can learn the CULTURE of our new family... - we call this CHURCH.

We gather together, in community, to welcome, support, and care for each other. It's a place of learning and worship and service... where we practice living out this new way of life... together.

*“Through him you believe in God,
who raised him from the dead and glorified him,
and so your faith and hope are in God.
Now that you have purified yourselves
by obeying the truth
so that you have sincere love for your brothers,
love one another deeply, from the heart.
For you have been born again,
not of perishable seed,
but of imperishable,
through the living and enduring word of God.”*
1 Peter 1:21-23

Together we learn and live what love means. We love God in our worship, we love ourselves and each other in fellowship, and we learn to love all peoples and all of creation through our service.

The church shapes how we live - just as our own families shape us, and hopefully prepare us for life ‘out there’ - in a similar way, the church shapes us in the image of Jesus... for life ‘out there’...

As we gather together, we are the family of God, and we become the people of God. What’s more, in some mysterious way, as we are corporately filled with the Holy Spirit, we become the Body of Christ in this world.

A KINGDOM TO BRING

And then we learn that this family doesn’t just have a way to follow, and a culture to live, but it also has a MISSION... - it has something to do.

Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the Kingdom of God... - he spent a lot of time talking about making this place, the one in which we live, more like Heaven.

In fact, it’s even there in the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name... THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE... ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN...”

In other words, Heaven, obviously, is a place where God’s will is done. But, on earth, some things are not the way they’re supposed to be.

- There’s still pain and suffering...
- There’s still pride and self-centeredness...
- There’s still impurity, idolatry, immorality, wickedness and evil...

The old way... the old culture... who we used to be...

And so, as members of God’s family, we try and make not just our lives, but this place more like Heaven... we try to bring more love, and grace, and forgiveness, and healing, and peace... - because that’s what God’s family does.

As members of the family of God we strive to live out the culture of the family of God into the world... to partner with him in making the world (and ourselves) more like he made it (and us) to be... and in this new vision of our lives and our world, we find our HOPE.

*“For you did not receive a spirit
that makes you a slave again to fear,
but you received the Spirit of sonship.
And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”
The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit
that we are God’s children.
Now if we are children,
then we are heirs-- heirs of God
and co-heirs with Christ,
if indeed we share in his sufferings
in order that we may also share in his glory.
I consider that our present sufferings are not
worth comparing with the glory that will be
revealed in us.”*
Romans 8:15-18

And that is what it means to become a Christian.