

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN AND BEING A CHRISTIAN

It seems to me that many people are a lot clearer about what it means to become a Christian than what it means to be a Christian. It's like one of those film sets where a row of house fronts is held up from behind by scaffolding; you walk through the door to find that there's no house behind it. Since this doesn't often get talked about in or out of church, most people assume that being a Christian means trying to be good, going to church and, for the keen and bold, telling other people about Jesus. This caricature is hardly likely to produce the revolutionary kind of life we see in the New Testament.

To get a clearer picture of both what it means to become a Christian and to be a Christian, we need to know the big story of the Bible. We'll use a simple outline: Creation, Fall (how the creation was ruined), Rescue, Judgement, New Creation; and ask three questions: What was God's intention for the world (and what was our part in that)? What has gone wrong in the world (and how has that affected us)? What is God doing about that (and how does he involve us?). This will then help us answer our two central questions about what it means to become and to be a Christian.

CREATION

The opening stories of the Bible are some of the most profound ever written. Genesis 1 explores the nature of God and the meaning of our lives; God created a wonderful world, bringing order to it and filling it with life. Then he created humanity 'in his image' commissioning them to rule and reign and to be fruitful and multiply, in other words to bring order to the world and fill it with life. God was inviting Adam and Eve to join in with what he was doing. We were entrusted with ruling his world and were to reflect his character and creativity. That's the meaning of our lives: to share in the purposes and the heart of God through being creative and fruitful and ruling his creation. But there's a lot of water under the bridge since Genesis 1, not least Genesis 3.

FALL

Adam and Eve allowed themselves to be deceived about the heart of God and were seduced into going against his instruction by experimenting with evil. The results were catastrophic: Humanity was alienated from God and from each other, we were corrupted and enslaved by the power of evil bringing death, and God's wonderful world was ruined. That's why God often seems so distant and life, although wonderful, can also be agonisingly painful and seem empty and hopeless. We experience our slavery to sin in obvious ways: addiction, violence, rage, cravings, control and manipulation, and in more subtle ways: selfishness, pride, contempt, stubbornness, coldness and self-obsession. Ultimately we all die. Fortunately God has not abandoned his creation and us to our fate and set out on a long rescue plan.



RESCUE

God created a wonderful world and created us to rule it, but we embraced evil, ruining the world and enslaving us to corruption and death. Just as God had determined to rule the world through people, so he determined to rescue the world through people. His long plan was worked out through the story of Israel and came to a climax in Israel's Messiah, Jesus.

In Jesus, the creator himself stepped into his wonderful, ruined world. In his crucifixion he went head to head with sin and evil and suffered its ultimate consequence, death. In his resurrection he overcame death. Since death was the ultimate consequence of sin and evil, he overcame sin and evil. And since it was sin and evil that ruined the world, Jesus demonstrated that he could rescue the world from the power of sin and evil.

In his death, Jesus took upon himself the guilt and shame of our sin as our substitute, paying its ultimate price, so we could be freely forgiven by God and freely forgive each other. Jesus' death in our place means our alienation from God and each other, our guilt and our shame, can be overcome allowing our relationships with God and each other to be restored. In his resurrection Jesus overcame sin and death and so can offer us new life. This empowers us to overcome our slavery to sin in our daily life and, ultimately, will undo our death. This frees us from the compulsive and corrupting power of sin in our lives, meaning we can begin to live as God intended us to.

Jesus commissions his followers to announce his victory over sin and death and his offer of forgiveness and new life to the whole world. Because of Jesus, sin and death have been defeated and no longer have the last word, but they're still present and powerful in our world. This is a temporary situation which will be resolved when Jesus returns.

JUDGEMENT AND NEW CREATION

When the Bible speaks of judgement it doesn't mean God getting even with people who've dented his ego. Judgement is God acting decisively against sin and evil in order to rescue his world. When Jesus returns he'll raise the dead and banish all sin, evil and death from his world. Those who've responded to his offer of forgiveness and new life will find their place in the new creation where everything will be renewed and sin, evil and death will be no more. The creation will then be all that God intended and we will finally fulfil the purpose for which he made us, bearing his image, being fruitful and ruling and reigning. All of this gives the context to make sense of what it means to become a Christian and to be a Christian.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

We've seen that sin, rejecting God and embracing evil, has affected us in two main ways: It's alienated us in our relationships with God and each other, and it's corrupted and enslaved us to sin ultimately resulting in our death. Through his death Jesus has paid for our sin, dealing with our guilt and shame, so that our relationship with God can be restored and our relationships with each other can be healed. The forgiveness he offers addresses our broken relationships. Through his resurrection, Jesus has overcome sin and death, dealing with our slavery and corruption, so that we can begin to live as he intended us to, and ultimately he can rescue us from death. The new life he offers addresses our corruption and our slavery to sin and death.





In order to receive forgiveness and new life from Jesus we firstly need to acknowledge our sin, that we've rejected God, lived independently of him and his directions, and have damaged ourselves and our world. Secondly he asks us to trust him to forgive us and renew us not through our own moral effort or religious observance but through Jesus' death and resurrection. Forgiveness and new life are a gift, not a reward, which we take hold of as we turn from sin to Jesus and trust him. Thirdly we need to abandon living independently of him and bring our lives back into line with his life by obeying him, not because we have to, but because we love and trust him.

To become a Christian, then, is to turn away from sin, to trust Jesus to forgive us and empower us to live a new life, and to make him and his will the first priority in our lives. As we do this Jesus forgives us and reconnects us to God which allows all our other relationships to be healed, and he gives us new life by the Holy Spirit which gives us the power to break the stranglehold of sin and bring our life back into line with his will. We're also promised that when Jesus returns to rid the creation of sin, evil and death, he'll raise us from the dead and bring us into the renewed world which will be all he intended it to be. So, if that is what it means to become a Christian, what does that mean for our life until we die or Jesus returns, what does it mean to be a Christian?

BEING A CHRISTIAN

The New Testament uses the word 'Christian' just four times, the main New Testament word for a Christian is a disciple. A disciple was a follower of a teacher (a rabbi) who's aim was to become like his rabbi, adopting his practice of life and carrying forward his mission. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus, seeking to become like him and to carry forward his mission in the world. To sharpen our understanding of that, we must explore what it means to become like him and clarify his mission in the world.

To become like Jesus is primarily a question of character. When Jesus was asked to sum up the whole of the Old Testament he boiled it down to two commands: Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbour as yourself. One powerful way to understand sin is to see it as a failure of love, first of all towards God, and flowing out from that, towards his creation and his creatures. Sin turns us in on ourselves, enslaving us to a radical selfishness, distorting and disfiguring us and all of our relationships. It causes us to become angry, resentful, manipulative, jealous and callous. At the same time, sin dulls our self-awareness and encourages us to justify ourselves and embrace self-deception in order to have the highest possible view of ourselves.

The Holy Spirit and God's word, the Bible, work together to expose our sin and lead us into new patterns of thinking and relating. As we begin to realise and experience God's love for us through prayer, worship, Christian community and service, that begins to change our heart towards God, others and the world. This new perspective and new heart leads us into lives of forgiveness, sacrificial service and seeking healing for the brokenness we see in ourselves, others and the communities and world of which we're a part.

If the heart of following Jesus is to love God and to love others, then the heart of mission is to help others to encounter Jesus and to come to love him and love others. God is reaching out to the whole world with the offer of forgiveness and new life through those who follow Jesus. In Luke 19:10 Jesus said he had come to "seek and save the lost." If that's what Jesus is doing, then to follow him must mean that we become involved in what he's doing, reaching out to his ruined, dying world with forgiveness and new life.



Jesus is rescuing the world and he's doing that as his followers take his offer of forgiveness and new life to the world. However, his rescuing the world is a means to an end, not the end in itself. Jesus is rescuing the world so it can be all that he intended it to be when he first created it. He's rescuing us so that we can be all he intended us to be when he first created us. He's bringing us back to the place where we reflect his image as we rule his world and as we're creative and fruitful.

We all have a small sphere of the world for which we're responsible and a larger sphere over which we have influence. In those spheres we rule and we have the potential to be creative and fruitful, and in those spheres we're to live out what it means to express the loving, creative, wise, just and healing rule of God in his world. This may mean serving our families, it may mean campaigning against injustice, it may mean serving the poor and needy, it may mean not colluding in corruption at work, it may mean listening and caring for our friends, it may mean forgiving and loving our enemies. We're to live in the world like a movie trailer for God's renewed creation so the world can see what it looks like when life is lived in relationship with God.

To be a disciple is to love God and love people. To be involved in Jesus' mission is to make disciples, helping others to meet Jesus, love him and love others. To be a renewed human being in God's world is to express his heart in everything for which we're responsible or have influence. This is what it means to be a Christian, a disciple.

SUMMARY

God created a wonderful world and created us to reflect him, to rule his world and to be fruitful and creative, in order to share in his heart. However, we sinned, rejecting God and embracing evil. This broke our relationships with God and each other, enslaved us to corruption, evil and death and ruined God's wonderful world. As God had chosen to govern the world through humans, so he chose to rescue the world through humans. Jesus came in fulfilment of the long story of Israel. In his death and resurrection he overcame sin evil and death, offering us forgiveness and new life. His followers are now taking his offer to the whole world before he comes again to finally throw sin, evil and death out of his world, raise the dead and renew the whole creation. Then the world and humanity will finally become all that he intended.

To become a Christian is to decide to abandon sin and choose instead to love and obey God. As we do that and put our trust in Jesus to forgive us, to renew us and to lead us, he forgives all of our sin, makes us new people by his Holy Spirit and begins to lead us out of our old way of life and into the life for which we were created.

To be a Christian is to cooperate with God as he leads us out of sin and into a lifestyle of love and service, transforming our character and so transforming our relationships with him, with each other and with his creation. We join in with the mission of Jesus by sharing his offer of forgiveness and new life with everyone we can. In our daily life we look to express the wise, loving, just, creative and healing rule of God wherever we have responsibility or influence.

TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN	TO BE A CHRISTIAN
Abandoning sin	Loving God and loving others
Trusting Jesus for forgiveness and new life	Helping others to become disciples
Beginning to follow Jesus in our daily lives	Reflecting God as we rule and are fruitful