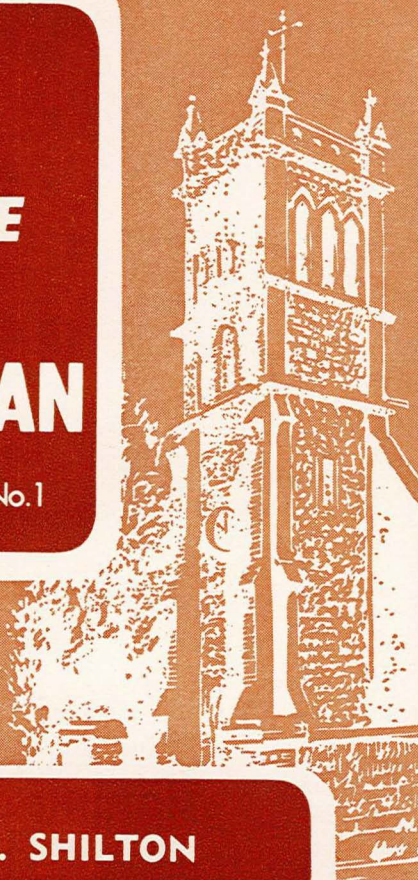


HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

Trinity Booklet No.1

LANCE R. SHILTON



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HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

An address given by

the Reverend

LANCE R. SHILTON, B.A., B.D., Th.L.
Rector of Holy Trinity Church,
Adelaide

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HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN.

No-one can pray a prayer like this and be disappointed -

'O, God, if you exist (and I'm not sure if you do), and if you can hear prayer' (and I do not know if you can), I want you to know that I am an honest seeker after truth. My mind is open; I am willing to believe. My will is surrendered; I am ready to obey. Teach me the truth. Show me if Jesus is your Son and the Saviour of the world. And if you bring conviction to my mind, I promise that I will accept Him as my Saviour, and follow Him as my Lord.'

Amen.

Anyone who prays a prayer like that will know what it means to become a Christian. But you may ask, 'What is a Christian?'

WHAT A CHRISTIAN IS. In the New Testament the word 'Christian' is used three times.

In Acts 11, 26, it says the disciples were called 'Christians'

first in Antioch. It is evident in this passage that the disciples were convinced believers in Jesus Christ.

The second occurrence is in 1 Peter, 4, 16: 'Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf'. Such convinced belief brings with it, as a logical consequence, the necessity of making it known, in spite of suffering.

The third occurrence is in Acts 26, 28: 'Then King Agrippa said unto Paul, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.' Here we see the challenge of such a convinced belief, which brings the need for decision clearly before those who witness it.

There are many popular misconceptions as to what a Christian is.

Some think that they are Christians because they have been born in a so-called Christian country. But that's not necessarily so. It's true that there's a certain traditional morality which has become

part of our heritage, but that does not make me a Christian, any more than a person born in India would necessarily be Hindu. One well-known evangelist said, 'If I were born in a garage, that would not make me the latest model motor-car.'

Some think they are Christians because they have Christian parents. Thank God that there are still a few who have this privilege, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the Christian status is handed down with the family name or with the family likeness. Each person has a will of his own and must make his own decisions.

Some consider themselves to be Christians because they have been through certain religious ceremonies. For example, whether Baptism takes place in infancy or as an adult, it is easy for us to take part in the outward ceremony and not to grasp the inner meaning. Because a person has been through these ceremonies it does not necessarily make that person a Christian.

Some consider themselves to be Christians because they attend Church occasionally. But people attend Church for various reasons. Some are called 'wheel-barrow' Christians; that is, they go only when they are pushed, and when they go they squeak, and they are very easily upset. True Christians go to Church so that they might worship God in fellowship with others who are believers in Christ.

Now, there are many reasons why people might attend Church; perhaps out of a sense of duty, or for the sake of appearance, or because there isn't a good T.V. show on that night; or perhaps on the other hand, they are seeking the truth. That is why we can't say that everybody who goes to church is necessarily a Christian.

The most popular misconception of all is the belief that a Christian is a person who has a certain code of ethics and tries to live a good life. Certainly a Christian does that, but not all people who endeavour to do this are Christians. The Jew, for instance,

tries to live a good life, and so does the Hindu, and the Mohammedan; and yet they would be most indignant if they were to be called Christians. I hope you don't misunderstand me. I am not trying to decry the value of a Christian country or the privilege of a Christian home, or the necessity of religious ceremonies, or the importance of church attendance, or the relevance of Christian ethics: but what I am trying to say is that these things don't necessarily make a person a Christian because the definition goes much more deeply than that.

A Christian knows what he is. He is a transgressor of the Law. In other words, he knows that he has failed to live up to the Ten Commandments. But there is no degree in this sin. It is almost as if you said, 'It is quite different to fall from a hundred storey building and to break my neck than to fall from a ten storey building and to break my neck'. Of course the difference is meaningless! You break your neck in both cases however great the distance. There is no degree of sin. We have all

transgressed the Law. The Christian knows that he is guilty of iniquity. Jesus said, 'Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, adultery, fornication, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness - all these things come from within and defile the man.'

The Christian knows that he has missed the mark.

A cricketer who has taken a risky single and scrambles down the pitch in an endeavour to get back to his crease realises that when the bails are off, he has missed his mark and the umpire gives him 'out'. The Christian realises that although he has stretched every muscle and strained every nerve, he still cannot reach the crease; he still has missed the mark and fallen short.

The Christian also realises that he has trespassed against God.

Often we see the sign 'Trespas-

sers prosecuted'. - a sign that would indicate that we are not to make an inroad into private or government property. Yet so often we know that this is our experience as far as our own lives are concerned. We make inroads into those things which are God's prerogative alone. We have trespassed on God's territory.

The Christian knows that he is a transgressor of the law; he is guilty of iniquity, he has missed the mark, he has trespassed against God. He knows that he has no power of himself to help himself.

A Christian also knows why Jesus came. He came not merely as a good man to set us a fine example and to show us how to live; a man to give us good advice, who carried it out consistently in his own life; a man who was deeply troubled by human need all around him and whose sympathy reached to all - a wonderful man! The Christian knows that He was more than a man - He was the Son of God. He was, and is, far above the level of other great teachers like Plato or Isaiah or

Mohammed. Prophets who came before Him could say only, 'Thus saith the Lord', but Jesus took upon Himself the divine prerogative and said, 'I say unto you.'

The Christian knows that the death of Christ was not simply the end of a martyr who died for a good cause, or the death of one who was caught up in unforeseen circumstances, or the death of one who was wanting to demonstrate the great love of God. The Christian knows that there is more than all that.

He sees Jesus Christ the Son of God, dying in his place. The just for the unjust - that He might bring us to God. He knows that his sins have been forgiven because the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses him from all sin.

The Christian also knows that Christ rose again from the dead, a fact in history, and that that Risen Christ has come to dwell in his heart with the gift of eternal life.

The Christian knows that he is

a Christian by personal experience. There is no uncertainty in his mind at all. He is able to say with St. Paul, 'I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day'. If there is any uncertainty in our hearts then it is a fair indication that we are not Christians in the New Testament sense of the term.

Let us, then, face the excuses for not becoming a Christian.

TRADITIONALISM. This is the excuse of the person who says, 'I was made to go to Church too often when I was young'. He was brought up on it; it's part of his tradition, and since then he has rebelled against it. Such a person however, would not complain that he was made to go to school when he was young. He is now grateful for the compulsion. Others would say, 'I had religion rammed down my throat when I was a child'. But such people don't complain about having vegetables rammed down their throats when they were children.

There is a curious idea that Christianity is all right for those who are religiously inclined, but it shouldn't enter the life of anyone else.

CONSERVATISM. We are all a little conservative. We don't like to appear different from other people. At least, that's true with the men! When a man buys a new suit, he likes to consider whether this year it's a stripe or plain, or a fleck; and when he ascertains what is the fashion for that year he makes very sure that he buys exactly the same kind of suit that every other man is wearing at that time.

As far as religious things are concerned, we are all a little conservative, because we don't like to appear to be different from other people. We don't want others to think that we are strange or peculiar or too religious, yet when a person becomes a Christian, he actually becomes a public man. He can no longer live a private life. He is open to the opinions and criticisms and exposures of all because he has become a Christian,

and his conservatism must, in that respect, go.

DENOMINATIONALISM. How often we have heard it said, 'If I become a Christian, then I won't know what Church to join - there are so many denominations! I don't know where I am with all these things'. In some ways, perhaps, this statement is fair enough; there is a lot of confusion about the various denominations; but once a person becomes a Christian he is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and he recognises truth in any denomination and can see that in many cases the differences are relatively unimportant, arising, perhaps, from national background, particular emphases, or from administrative differences. We may admire the fact that we can preach like a Presbyterian, sing like a Methodist, think like a Congregationalist, give like a Salvationist, or give up religion altogether like an Anglican!

MATERIALISM. This excuse is used by the person who has a good deal of worldly security in this life,

and is reasonably happy. He doesn't realise that his transitory happiness is dependent on temporary things. In adversity his property could change almost overnight, but he's prepared to take the risk because he realises that to become a Christian, his way of life would need to be changed. He would have to have a different moral standard in business or forego certain of his luxuries and have a new concern for other people. He would have to be more generous with his possessions. He would have to turn right about face and begin a new life with Christ. But he's not prepared for that.

INTELLECTUALISM. Certainly there are some people with honest intellectual doubts and difficulties; but if they are earnest seekers after the truth, without any prejudice, without any mental reservation, without any bias, then of necessity they must come to a knowledge of the truth, for Christ has said: 'Seek and ye shall find'.

There are others who use intellectualism as a cover for their

dishonesty. It is easy to say that we have 'our own philosophy' of life.

It is easy for us to try to make respectable our moral failures by calling them intellectual difficulties.

EMOTIONALISM. There are those who are only too ready to equate genuine Christian experience with emotionalism.

I agree entirely with those who deplore the deliberate stirring up of emotions by religious means such as those described in William Sargent's book, 'The Battle of the Mind'. But we cannot avoid emotion altogether. Any big decision which affects the whole of our personality has an emotional element within it, and to a greater or lesser degree each one of us is affected by emotion. What about the time we decided to get married? Was that devoid of feeling altogether? What about the time we stood by the grave of a loved one? Was that devoid of feeling altogether? What about the time when a Christian comes to

know Jesus Christ personally - should that be devoid of all feeling and emotion? He feels warmed in his heart and it is an experience which is real and true.

When both Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Phillipi, an earthquake broke open the prison then the Phillipian jailor, in great fear and trembling came to Paul and Silas and said, 'What must I do to be saved?' Could you imagine Paul saying to this Phillipian jailor in his time of great need and possible emotional disturbance, 'Wait until the walls stop shaking. Wait until the dust settles. Wait for a week or so. Go home, have a cold shower in the morning. Then come back, devoid of all emotion, and I'll give you the answer to your question'. Of course, it is too ridiculous for words! The fact is at that very moment when he was moved in his feelings, Paul gave the answer: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved'.

IDEALISM. Here is the person who says that Christianity is 'not

practical'. Why, Christianity has been in the world for 2,000 years, they say, and yet there is still vice and crime and sin what's the use of it? It's not practical! To which we could reply, 'Soap has been in the world for hundreds of years, but there are still boys with dirt behind their ears'. The important thing is that what has been provided should be applied; and wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is applied in the heart of a believer, it has proved to be a practical thing. Sometimes this excuse of idealism is used because a person sees inconsistencies in others who claim to be Christians, and they say, 'Well, if that person is a Christian, then I don't want to be one'. Yet when such a person turns his eyes upon Jesus, he sees the One who has fulfilled the ideal.

EGOISM. Here is the person who says, 'I can live my own life. I am master of my own destiny. I'm good enough as I am. I'm a self-made man. I need no help from anyone else'. Here is the person who is eaten up with pride. This

person will never become a Christian as long as this pride resides in his heart. It is a humbling thing to become a real Christian, because it means that we must accept 'something for nothing' and a proud man will never do this.

We will never enter into the experience of what it means to be a Christian believer until we can say with the hymn writer:

"When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride!"

We have looked at the excuses for not becoming a Christian, and now let us look at the REASONS FOR BECOMING A CHRISTIAN.

Firstly, the CONDITION OF THE WORLD. Time is running out. The tools of total annihilation have been placed within our reach. We cannot scurry up any more false paths. We can't explore any more unknown roads. We can't afford to be trapped in any more blind alleys. Our generation has ac-

complished what other generations only dreamed of doing, and that in their most insane moments of power and ruthlessness. We have achieved a weapon of total destruction, the climax of man's madness, the supreme triumph of evil is even before our very eyes, and 'men's hearts are failing them for fear' all over the world. This, surely, is a reason why we should become Christians, that we might recognise Christ as the Hope of the World.

Secondly, the CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE. Many people speak of the emptiness of life day by day. They say 'I couldn't care less!' They speak of the monotony of life. They are bored to tears day after day, and they seek some fleeting sensations to try to bring them relief from this boredom. They see the futility of life, and they wonder what is the use of everything. They see only 'the circumstance of life'. Surely here is a reason for any who are placed in this situation to become a Christian.

Thirdly, the CONSCIOUSNESS OF

SIN. Many lack this. I wonder is there in our hearts a real consciousness of sin. When a consciousness of sin really comes into our hearts, then we want to seek Christ because we can't escape it. Did you read about the A-bomb pilot who was responsible for dropping the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the last war? Whether, under the circumstances, he was actually guilty of something wrong or not will always be a debatable point, but he had a great guilt complex. Now he has been sent to an asylum because of the inescapable guilt complex which went into his soul.

We don't need an illustration like that to convince us of the consciousness of sin within ourselves. We don't even need to read the Bible to tell us this about ourselves. We don't even need to listen to any preacher or to any other person to tell this about ourselves, because this consciousness of sin is deep down in our hearts, and it gives us a reason why we should become Christians.

Fourthly, the CERTAINTY OF DEATH. From the day we were born we started to die, and each one of us needs to face this. Not one of us can avoid it. When we are young we don't think about it; when we are middle-aged, we put it off; but when we are older we are forced to think about it. We should think about it at all times, because we never know when death will come. The certainty of death is always before us. This is another reason why we should become Christians, so that we might say with St. Paul, 'Oh, death, where is thy sting? O, grave, where is thy victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fifthly, the COMING OF CHRIST. He told us that we should watch and pray, for we know not the day nor the hour. We read recently of a British scientist who said that the universe began with a fantastic explosion and will end some day. There was a definite begin-

ning and the universe will not last forever. There will be a definite end, and the Christian knows that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, but we know not the time nor the hour. The day of grace is still with us, but at the second coming of Christ it will be a day of judgment. This is another reason for each one of us to become a Christian right here and now.

Sixthly, the CONVICTION OF CHRISTIANS. Often I speak to people who are seeking Christ, who want to know the answer to life, and invariably there is someone else who has had some influence upon their lives, where they work, or live. The seeker says, 'I saw the life of so-and-so, and I said to myself, 'What is it he has that I haven't? I would like this for myself'.' The conviction in the hearts of the Christians is something which gives a reason to each one to become a Christian, that he, too, might find the answer to life.

Seventhly, the CHALLENGE OF THE TRUTH. As we honestly read the

Scriptures, the Spirit of God will speak through these pages. We'll recognise the truth of this Word, and it will challenge our hearts. As we look at the life of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, we become impressed by His holiness, and by the fact that He died in our stead and rose again that we might have life for evermore. We'll recognise the truth of His words: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father but by Me.' This truth of the written Word and the Incarnate Word, will provide another reason for becoming Christians.

Finally, the CALL OF THE SPIRIT. You have a deep hunger in your heart as you really long for something which you know you don't possess. You hear the call of the Spirit of God urging you to become a Christian for one or more of the reasons which we have set before us - the condition of the world, the circumstances of life, the consciousness of sin, the certainty of death, the coming of Christ, the conviction of Christians, the challenge of the truth, and the call of the

Spirit. You are asking right now: 'How may I become a Christian?'. 'Please pray that I may become a Christian!' ... 'This is something I long for more than anything else - something I have been seeking over the years.'

May I give you three single steps to follow:

The first step is REPENTANCE. This means not merely feeling sorry for the consequences of sin, but saying, 'I turn away from it. I want no more to do with it. I repent.' - not like Judas who repented because of the remorse which came to his soul from the consequences of his sin, but like Peter who came and turned to Christ and asked for forgiveness. Will you come in repentance like that; will you renounce the things which you know to be wrong in your life? Will you admit what you are? Will you repent of your sin and turn away from it? Is that your deep heart's desire? Do you really want to repent?

The second step is FAITH. Not

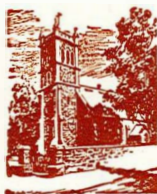
faith in yourself; not faith in your works; not faith in things that you've done; not faith in your Church attendance; not faith in your Christian country; not faith in your moral code; not faith in anyone but Christ! Christ, who came to live amongst us, who died for us upon the Cross that He might take our place there and take away our sin and rise again from the dead that he might offer us eternal life! Will you look in faith to Jesus Christ? Will you do this now? Turn your eyes upon Jesus! That's the second step.

The third step is LOVE, which really means 'obey'. Have you so committed your life to Him in complete faith that there's a love warming up in your heart towards Him right now, which means that you will obey Him and do what He says?

First, then, repentance: renounce your sin, admit who you are, expecting condemnation in that present state. Secondly, faith in Jesus Christ: believe that He died for your sin; accept what He

offers, counting on Christ. Thirdly, love towards Jesus Christ. Obey His word; acknowledge who He is ... Lord of your life, and count the cost! Be ready to follow Him now.

When these three steps are clear and you commit your life to Jesus Christ, you are born again by the Holy Spirit. You are converted from sin and self to Jesus Christ. You are saved from the condemnation of your own punishment because Christ has taken it upon Himself and you go free! You have seen the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ and there is no uncertainty in your heart, because you know that it is true. When this becomes your personal experience, this will be your prayer: 'O, God, you do exist. You can hear this prayer. I am honestly seeking the Truth - my mind is open. I do believe! My will is surrendered. I obey. I see the Truth. I recognise Jesus as your Son and as my personal Saviour. To become a Christian, I accept Him, now.'



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