

How Can I Become a Christian?

Trevor. For sometime now I have been thinking seriously about God, and the future, and about what a Christian really is. The last time we talked you said that the most important thing of all is that I should get right with God through Christ. That's what I've come to talk about. I want to know how I can become a Christian.

Pastor. I'll be very happy to discuss that, but can I start by asking you a question: Do you believe in the existence of God?

Trevor. Well, I think I do. There surely can't be many people who are atheists?

Pastor. There are some; but real atheists are few and far between because deep in the human soul and conscience there is a conviction that God really does exist. Added to this, the whole of creation is powerful evidence for his existence, because the only alternative is that everything came from nothing - and by chance!

Trevor. I certainly don't believe that - so I suppose I do believe in God.

Pastor. Well, let's be sure that you understand what I mean when I use the word 'God'. He is all powerful, holy and just. By that I mean that as the Creator of the universe there is nothing beyond his control. More than that, I mean God is not merely the great universal Mind or Soul, but on the contrary he is a personal being who is morally pure and clean in all his character. God is described in the Bible as 'light' because there is no dark side to him. In this way he is utterly different from us; and that's what the word 'holy' means - 'different'. I also said that God is 'just', because in everything he decides, and in everything he does, he is perfectly right and fair.

Trevor. That's something to think about. I don't know I had ever seen God quite like that. If God is really so clean and right then I must look pretty dirty to him.

Pastor. You said it! In fact we all look like that to God. That's why the Bible says we have all sinned, because no matter how hard we try, we all fall a long way short of what he expects of us.

Trevor. What does God expect of us?

Pastor. To be as perfect as he is himself.

Trevor. But surely that's not fair. No one on the face of the earth can be that perfect. Isn't God prepared to lower the standard a bit?

Pastor. How far would you like him to lower it, Trevor? Just above or just below your level?

Trevor. All right, point taken. But if I believe that God is all powerful, holy and just, where do I go from there?

Pastor. You have already taken the next step, which is to recognise that we fall very far short of what God expects.

Trevor. I know you said that God expects us to be as perfect as he is, but can you spell that out?

Pastor. As a matter of fact God himself does that for us in the Bible. For example the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount tell us there is to be no stealing, lying, broken promises, sex outside marriage, bitter attitudes, uncontrolled anger, greed or selfishness. We must not even **think** these things either, above all we must put God first in everything and then put others before ourselves. How do you think you rate Trevor?

Trevor. Badly!

Pastor. Does **anyone** measure up to that standard?

Trevor. No, it's impossible. We're all human.

Pastor. Right. But saying 'we're all human' simply explains us, it doesn't excuse us. So it's obvious that just trying to keep God's standard doesn't make us Christians. Recently I overheard two women complimenting each other on the good things each had done in her life and one said: 'Well dear, remember it's all notched up.' I couldn't help wondering if she had ever considered the fact that if our good deeds are 'all notched up' so are our bad deeds.

Trevor. That doesn't bear thinking about.

Pastor. But the New Testament tells us that one day even our secrets will be judged by God and that he knows everything. In fact the Old Testament prophet Isaiah goes further and says that all the good works that we think will impress God are like dirty rags in his sight.

Trevor. Come on! That's going a bit too far isn't it?

Pastor. Do you think so? Well, let me give you an illustration. You're a bricklayer aren't you? You may be surprised to know that on one occasion I built a wall in my garden; it was only a small one of course; but I built it to the very best of my ability. If you saw it now you wouldn't think very much of it. The bricks are not quite level, the pointing is uneven and there's a lot of mortar on the facing. It was my best, but by your standards it was pretty poor. Now the standard by which God assesses our lives is the perfect rightness of Jesus Christ, who never did anything wrong in thought, word or action. In the light of that you can see why our best is like dirty rags.

Trevor. So the first step to becoming a Christian is to believe in the God who is all-powerful, holy and just in every way, and to admit that by comparison we are very disobedient and sinful. I can see the problem but what's the cure?

Pastor. Unfortunately many people call themselves Christians when they are not. I'm afraid a lot of people think they are Christians just because they are born into a country where so-called Christianity is the majority religion. But that would make being a Christian dependant upon an opinion poll - and you know how notoriously unreliable they are! So let's be clear that no one is a Christian just because they are born in Britain, America, or in any other country. Then there are millions who think they are Christian because they were christened as a baby.

Trevor. What's wrong with that?

Pastor. Sprinkling with water can never take away sin, however sincerely it is done. According to the Bible, Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and it doesn't depend upon whether your parents or grandparents - or anybody else for that matter - had religious expectations for you; or whether a priest or minister sprinkled water over you. The Bible doesn't teach us anything like that. However, I suppose most people who have a false idea that they are Christians believe that the way to become a Christian is to do your best, live a reasonably good life and then everything will turn out all right in the end.

Trevor. I suppose that sums up me.

Pastor. Do you see how dangerous that idea is? It makes people feel comfortable and they don't see any need to take Christ too seriously. If you have been thinking that living a good life is all that's needed to be a Christian, then you must have been assuming that somewhere there is a standard that tells us what a 'good life' is. After all, it would be nonsense to say that I must live a good life in order to be right with God, and then admit that no one knows what a good life is.

Trevor. I suppose the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount that we referred to earlier is the kind of standard God expects.

Pastor. You're right. And we have already admitted that we haven't kept them; in fact, if we are honest we don't even obey what our own conscience tells us to do.

Trevor. But there must be a lot of people who are worse than I am.

Pastor. No doubt, but God doesn't compare us with other people. If I place a ten centimetre ruler beside myself and stand tall I can feel like a giant, but if I stand beside a ten metre rule then I feel like a pygmy. In the same way if God places the perfect life of Christ alongside me then it is obvious how far short of the standard I fall.

Trevor. So if being a Christian is not the same as being born into a country that calls itself Christian, and it is not the same as being christened, and it doesn't depend upon whether or not our parents or grandparents were Christians, and even our good works don't make us Christians, there isn't much left is there? I suppose being a Christian doesn't depend upon how often we go to church either.

Pastor. No, it doesn't. However, it's a wise thing to go regularly to a church where the Bible is believed and taught because it will help to straighten out your thinking.

You see, God speaks to us through the Bible. But you could go to a church like this for the rest of your life and still not be a Christian. You wouldn't sit in a garage for the rest of your life and expect to become a motor car would you?

Trevor. But how do we know everything won't turn out all right for everyone in the end?

Pastor. Wish on Trevor! A lot of people live in this vain hope, but it's not real is it? Do you honestly believe that God is going to ignore all the evil of the world's great criminals - like Hitler and Stalin and scores of others?

Trevor. No, but then they are exceptionally evil; I mean we're not all as bad as them are we?

Pastor. But I thought we had agreed that in the light of Christ's perfect rightness each one of us is like dirty rags - some might be dirtier than others, but we're all dirty. Even if God grades sinners into categories from bad to terrible it's a bit risky to hope against hope that you will get into the best bad grade - if you see what I mean. I once worked for a farmer who reared ducks for Christmas. The time came when he told me to go into the pen and pick out the really big ones; that was easy because some of them were so much bigger than the rest - they stood out plainly. But when I had removed the really big ducks and looked back into the pen, there were still some that were bigger than the rest. They were not as big as the ones I had just removed, but they were bigger than all the rest in the pen. So I took those out - but there were still some that were bigger than the rest . . .

Trevor. I see what you're driving at. If God just punished the really big sinners, sooner or later he will arrive at me. So, how can anyone become a Christian?

Pastor. Let me go back to where I started for a moment. The Bible teaches us about a personal and powerful God who made everything. There is only one true God. Everything about him is perfect and everything he does is perfect. He never makes a mistake and never does anything wrong. He made man and woman right at the beginning with the intention that they should have sinless and happy lives in friendship with himself. At the start everything went well, but then Adam and Eve decided to 'go it alone' and they rebelled against God. That was the beginning of the disaster called sin. From then on everybody who has ever been born has a bias away from God and rightness. That's why no one has to teach a child to do wrong; it comes naturally and easily.

Trevor. But there are plenty of religious people in the world.

Pastor. Yes, and I'm afraid religion is the most effective way ever invented for keeping men and women away from finding the only true God.

Trevor. Just a minute. Surely you don't mean that?

Pastor. Yes I do. You see every religion or philosophy invented by man tells him to work harder, do better, climb a bit higher and then he just **might** please God. But we've seen that this isn't the way. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that salvation

is not a matter of good works or human effort. In fact I'm glad it isn't, because if it was left to us we would never be sure that we had done enough to please God.

Trevor. Then how do we get salvation?

Pastor. Let's be sure we understand what we have discussed so far. God is perfectly right in every way, and we are so far wrong that we can't live up to his standards. But there's something else very important to understand: Because God is fair and just he cannot overlook our sin; he says we must be judged and be found guilty and then be punished. We talked earlier about how he will judge even our secrets. No one can escape that because God tells us that we die just once and after death comes the judgement.

Trevor. And since we have all rebelled against God and broken his rules, and since we can't save ourselves by our nationality, parentage, religion or even our good deeds then there's no hope for anyone.

Pastor. Exactly! And that is the very point at which the Christian message is good news; that's what the word 'gospel' means: 'good news'. But this good news must be simple enough for a young child to understand, sure enough for a doubter to be certain of, and strong enough to guarantee its offer; after all, none of us wants to hazard our eternity on make-believe or something we can't make sense of do we? The good news is summed up in a verse in the Bible found in John 3:16 which reads like this: 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' I'd like to take that verse and show you God's good news from it. I'll start at the end and work backwards. Did you notice that there is an alternative right at the end?

Trevor. Yes, it seems to say that we either have eternal life or we are in danger of perishing. But what does it mean to perish?

Pastor. The word 'perish' refers to something that is lost or spoiled for ever and ever. God's final punishment upon sinners - and that means upon all of us unless we take hold of the good news - is to leave us unforgiven and unchanged for ever.

Trevor. Is that what hell is?

Pastor. Yes it is. Hell is the condition of eternal punishment where we are separated from the love, peace and joy of friendship with God and are left to stay in the misery of unforgiven sin and an unchanged heart. You see, hell is not annihilation; it is not just nothingness or oblivion. Hell is separation from all that is good; and it is a conscious punishment.

Trevor. That's scary.

Pastor. It's a lot worse than that. But the alternative offered is the good news of eternal life.

Trevor. That sounds like nothing more than endless existence.

Pastor. No, it's much better than that. Eternal life is enjoying what we were originally made for, which is friendship with God. The last book in the Bible describes it like this in Revelation 21:3-4, 'The dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' That's what we call heaven.

Trevor. So how does someone on the way to hell switch track and get on the road to heaven?

Pastor. That's exactly what the next part of John 3:16 says - as we work our way backwards: '**whoever believes in him** shall not perish but have eternal life.' The word 'believe' is another way of saying 'have faith'. We'll talk about that in a minute, but notice you have to believe in Christ, the Son of God.

Trevor. I believe in Christ; I always have.

Pastor. I know what you mean but that's not what our verse is talking about. In my own life there has never been a time when I did not believe that Jesus lived and that he did the miracles recorded in the New Testament, but that didn't make me a Christian. You may be surprised to learn that the Bible says even the devil believes in Jesus! When you think about it he's bound to because the life and miracles of Jesus are simply facts of history. There are no credits for believing the obvious. It was not until I was a teenager that for the first time I understood who Christ was and what he had done for me.

Trevor. What has he done?

Pastor. First we must understand that Jesus Christ is no less God than his Father in heaven who sent him into this world. Christ did not become the Son of God when he was conceived in the womb of Mary by the unseen miracle of the Holy Spirit. He had always been the Son of God. Jesus is called the Son of God because Sonship was his special relationship with the Father from all eternity. John 3:17 says that God 'sent his Son' into the world, which implies that he was God's Son before he came. That special relationship shows that Christ was no less God than the Father himself. Paul confirms this in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 where he says that all the fullness of God dwelt in Christ. Immediately that should make us take the life and death of Christ very seriously. He was not merely a great prophet or religious teacher - Christ was God himself!

Trevor. So that's why he could live a completely perfect life, free from any sin. No one else could do that.

Pastor. Yes. In fact a verse in the New Testament actually tells us that he was 'without sin'. During his life-time Jesus challenged his enemies: 'Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?'

Trevor. I don't think I would dare to throw out a challenge like that!

Pastor. Of course not. In fact nobody except Christ could. That's what makes him unique. In front of all those people who were trying to catch him out, and in front of his own family and neighbours, Jesus could challenge anyone to prove him guilty of sin! If anyone else tried that, their claim would be demolished in minutes, but two thousand years later the life of Christ is still found to be blameless.

Trevor. Then why did he have to die?

Pastor. This brings us to the heart of the Christian good news. Death is God's punishment for sin; but as Christ never sinned he did not need to die.

Trevor. So, why did he die?

Pastor. According to the Bible the answer is that he died not for his own sins but for the sins of others. Let me make it very personal: On the cross God the Father put all my sin and guilt and punishment upon Christ and he took the blame for what I had done. He became a substitute for me. He took my place and bore my penalty. The Bible says he 'became sin' for me. You may remember that when Christ died on the cross the sky went dark and Christ cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' That was when Christ took my place.

Trevor. It seems a bit hard of God to do that to his own Son.

Pastor. It was, but God says there is no other way. Sin is serious and it has to be punished. If the punishment falls on me it means hell, but if it falls on Christ instead it means forgiveness. Let me quote you two verses in the New Testament to show you what God has done, one is from Paul and the other from Peter. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul says, 'God made him, who had no sin, to be sin for us', and in 1 Peter 2:24 Peter says, 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.'

Trevor. Does that mean that because of Christ's death I can have all my sin forgiven?

Pastor. Yes, all of it.

Trevor. However bad some of it is?

Pastor. Yes, nothing is too bad for him to forgive.

Trevor. And will it be taken away as if I had never done it?

Pastor. Yes, completely.

Trevor. And can I have the kind of eternal life you talked about just now?

Pastor. Yes, that's God's promise, not mine. But listen, I've only told you half the story. That verse from Paul I read a moment ago actually continues like this: 'so that in him (that means in Christ) we might become the righteousness of God.' And the one from Peter continues: 'so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.'

Trevor. What does that mean?

Pastor. It means that in return for my sin and guilt, Christ puts all his rightness to my account. It's like taking off dirty rags and putting on brand new clothes, or to change the picture, wiping out a massive overdraft and having an enormous sum placed to my credit. In other words, God sees the Christian as being as pure and righteous as Christ himself.

Trevor. So that's why nobody has to work hard to earn salvation? God offers it as a free gift.

Pastor. That's exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 3:22, 'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.'

Trevor. That's the word 'believe' again. You said you would tell me how I personally can become a Christian.

Pastor. First of all you have to realise your great need and God's great salvation. I hope you can see now that your greatest need is to be forgiven for your sin which is rebellion against God. I hope you can also see that God's great salvation is that he gave his Son Jesus Christ to take sin and guilt and punishment upon himself so that sinners can be covered over with Christ's righteousness instead.

Trevor. I can see all that. But how can I experience that for myself?

Pastor. There is a very important word in the Christian vocabulary called 'repentance'.

Trevor. That means feeling sorry for my sin.

Pastor. It includes that certainly, but there is much more to repentance than just being sorry. Most prisoners are sorry that their crime has landed them in gaol but they may not be sorry for the crime itself. Repentance means a change of mind; it means we hate not just the result of sin but the sin itself; and it also means that we hate the fact that our sin separated us from God and put Christ on the cross. In addition it means that we long for a new and changed life with Christ as our Lord.

Trevor. I didn't realise repentance meant all that.

Pastor. Well it does, and this longing for change has to be accompanied by a full trust in Christ as the one who alone is able to reconcile us to God. That's faith - or believing.

Trevor. That makes the word 'believe' bigger than I first thought. If I understand you correctly, repentance and faith means telling God not only that I'm sorry but that I want to be forgiven and that I'm ready for Christ to take charge of my life?

Pastor. That's it. Because whilst you can't earn your salvation, there is no forgiveness offered to anyone who is not prepared for Christ to be Lord. We must accept that he has the right to change our lives. But remember: he only wants the very best for us, so any changes he brings in will only be for our good.

Trevor. What sort of changes are you thinking about?

Pastor. The biggest change is the way you think about yourself and God. First of all the Christian no longer argues with the fact that he or she is sinful and deserves God's punishment; anyone who argues with that is clearly not a Christian. Then we see God as the powerful, holy and just God that we spoke about at the beginning. But the change also affects the way we think about the world and its values. Pleasing God becomes the number one priority in life.

Trevor. What sort of things will have to change in my life if I become a Christian?

Pastor. To some extent that differs from person to person because there may be habits or friendships that are condemned by God's Word, the Bible, and clearly they must go when we become followers of Christ. We have to allow Christ as our new Master to determine what we watch and read, and how we spend our money and use our time. Traits in our character, like temper, selfishness, filthy talk, and immoral habits will have to change. I hope you understand that changing these things doesn't make you a Christian, but that you must be ready for change before you take the first step. These changes are not the way **in** to the Christian life - that is a free gift - but they are the way **on** in following Christ. They are not the root, but they are the fruit.

Trevor. So, if I'm ready for that, how do I take the first step?

Pastor. God is loving and he is willing to rescue you; but you must talk to him.

Trevor. You mean I must pray? I've never prayed in my life - well not that I can remember anyway. What do I say?

Pastor. If you are really sincere with God and want to be a Christian, you will find your own words to own up to him and tell him you are a sinner and you are sorry for rebelling against him. You will want to tell him that you long to be forgiven and to have Christ in charge from now on. You will then simply ask him to forgive you, thank him for all that Christ has done for you on the cross and tell him you are ready to serve Christ in the future. God isn't bothered with carefully chosen words, he knows what we mean and he reads our hearts. So talk to him in a sincere and natural way.

Trevor. But how can I be sure that he will hear and forgive me? And how can I be sure I will keep on being a Christian? And what's the next step after I've asked God to forgive me?

Pastor. Hold on! Let's take those one at a time. How can you be sure God will listen to your prayer and will forgive you? Because Jesus once promised 'Whoever comes to me I will never drive away' - and you can trust him to keep his word; and also because the New Testament tells us that if we own up to our sin: 'He is faithful and

just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.' So, trust God to keep his promises.

How can you be sure you will never lose your salvation? First of all because, again, you have Christ's word for it. In John 10:28 he promises: 'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.' But also, as you read your Bible you will discover the amazing fact that nobody is a Christian because they chose to follow God, but because long before the world began, God chose to save them.

Trevor. You mean God already knows whether I genuinely want to find him and want him to rescue me?

Pastor. It's not just that he already knows, but that he has already made plans to save those who come to him. Jesus once said to his disciples, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' Paul confirms this in Ephesians 1:4, 'God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.'

Trevor. That puts it all in a different light. It means that if I become a Christian today, it is not, first of all, the result of what I want or how hard I try, but of God's love and what he has planned.

Pastor. That's right. In fact, without realising it you nearly quoted from the New Testament just then because in Romans 9:16 Paul says, 'It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.'

Trevor. It's encouraging to know that God is so interested in me.

Pastor. In addition to God's promises in the Bible, and the fact that God set his love on those who become Christians from before the world was made, there is another good reason for you to be confident that if you become a Christian you will never lose your salvation.

Trevor. What's that then?

Pastor. One of the most remarkable things about becoming a Christian is that, as the Bible puts it, we 'participate in the divine nature'. Jesus once said that in order to get right with God a person needs to be 'born again'; and it is God the Holy Spirit who brings about this miracle. What is more, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the Christian's life and, as Jesus promised his disciples, he comes 'to be with you for ever'. That being the case, you should not be surprised when I tell you that once you become a Christian you can never lose your salvation.

Trevor. That's a lot to remember, but if I ask God to forgive me and come into my life, what is the next step?

Pastor. Briefly let me give you what we could call the ABC of starting a new life as a Christian. 'A' stands for Active Service. Get among Christians where you can work for Christ and tell others about him. 'B' stands for Bible, which is essential reading for the Christian. Some Christians prefer the Authorised Version, but among the best of the modern translations are the New King James Version and the New International

Version. Plan to read a little each day. You could start by reading the life of Christ from one of the New Testament gospels, or even Paul's letter to the church at Rome - that would show you what it means to be a Christian. You won't understand everything you read, but can always ask a Christian to help you. In fact, one of the best things you could do is to meet up with another Christian each week to discuss what you have been reading and to talk over any problems you have come across in your new Christian life.

Trevor. What does 'C' stand for?

Pastor. 'C' stands for Church. Find a church where the Bible is believed and preached and where Christians will care for you. In the New Testament the first things the new Christians wanted to do was to meet regularly to listen to preaching, pray together, enjoy friendship together and to worship God together. After this no one could stop them telling others about their new life in Christ. Now, if you really want to become a Christian, don't put it off. Go and be on your own and ask God to forgive you for Christ's sake. If you do become a Christian please let me know. I would love to help you to grow in your Christian life.

****As a result of reading this booklet you may have become a Christian. You are encouraged to tell the person who recommended this booklet to you. Or you may like to write to the publishers. They will help you to find your nearest evangelical church and will encourage you as you start out on your new life as a Christian.*