

The Christian Life

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

The Christian life is the life of repentance, faith, and good works lived through the power of the Spirit and with the help of the means of grace as the Christian is conformed to the image of Christ to the glory of God.

SUMMARY

The Christian life is based upon the work of God in the new birth, justification, the gift of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and our union to Christ. The goal of the Christian life is to be conformed into the image of Christ and, as a result, to share in God's rule on the earth to the glory of God. Using various means of grace, such as Scripture, prayer, the Church, and the sacraments, God conforms the Christian into the image of Christ by the Spirit. The healthy Christian life is shown in faith and obedience, good works, sacrificial living and giving, and participation in the worldwide mission of the Church.

There is no better life to live than the Christian life. We shall consider this tremendous subject under five main headings. We begin with the basis of the Christian life: on what is it founded? Second, before addressing the daily realities of the Christian life, we take a look ahead to the end and ask: what is the goal of the Christian life? To what is it heading? Then, we consider the heart of the Christian life: that it is a matter of the heart. Fourth, we take a look at the means by which the Christian life is led, what are sometimes called "means of grace." Then, in our final section, we trace out some of the salient features of the Christian life.

The Basis of the Christian Life

We shall only understand the Christian life in the present if we grasp the foundation upon which it is built. The Bible speaks of this in at least the following seven ways.

Repentance and Faith

God commands all people everywhere to repent ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Peter gives this command on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:38](#)) and it is the consistent teaching of the New Testament. We are to turn from our sin and to trust in Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord. Without this repentance and faith, there is no Christian life. Indeed, repentance and faith are not simply the shape of the beginning of the Christian life; they are the shape of all of the Christian life, day after day after day.

But there is a problem; we are neither willing nor able to repent and believe in Christ unless God works in us, for repentance and faith are ultimately the gift of God (cf. [2 Tim. 2:25](#)). The remaining six ways of speaking about the basis of the Christian life all focus on the sovereign action of God. Although we experience the beginnings of the Christian life in terms of our own repentance and faith, we come to understand that none of that would have happened unless God had first worked in us in his kindness.

New Birth

By nature, we are spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins ([Eph. 2:1](#)). We can do nothing to save ourselves. God must give us birth from above, or new birth ([John 3:1-8](#)).

The Gift of the Spirit

This birth comes to us by the Holy Spirit who enters our hearts to give us life. By faith we receive the promised Holy Spirit ([Gal. 3:14](#)).

Adoption as God's children

In giving us new birth, the Holy Spirit brings us into the family of God by adoption ([Rom. 8:15](#)). We become children of God. Sometimes the Bible uses the phrase “sons of God” for both men and women. This is not sexist; it expresses the wonderful truth that each of us, male or female, enters by grace into the privilege of the sonship of Jesus. It is a wonderful thing to be a child of God ([1 John 3:1-2](#)). All who are adopted into God's family may share the assurance that God has predestined us for this in his love ([Eph. 1:5](#)).

The forgiveness of our sins

Right from the first day of the Christian life we may be sure that all our sins have been forgiven; the forgiveness of sins is a core part of the gospel message and a foundational element in the start of the Christian life (e.g. [Matt. 26:28](#); [Luke 24:47](#); [Acts 10:43](#); [Eph. 1:7](#)).

Justification

The righteousness of Christ is reckoned, or imputed, to us by grace, because our sin has been reckoned to Christ's account on the cross. We are therefore “justified” or “declared righteous” in God's sight because of the atoning death of Jesus as the propitiation for our sins ([Rom. 3:21-26](#); [5:1-2](#)).

Being incorporated “in Christ”

All these privileges—adoption, forgiveness, justification, the gift of the Spirit, new birth—are summed up in the New Testament by the important phrase “in Christ.” This does not mean that we are physically inside of Christ; it means we are in union with Christ. This is a deep union. It means that his death is accounted as our death, his resurrection as our (present spiritual and future bodily) resurrection, and his ascension as our certain future ascension (e.g. [Rom. 6; 8:1](#); [Gal. 3:26](#); [Eph. 2:5-6](#); [Col. 3:3](#)).

The Goal of the Christian Life

To what end is the Christian life heading? What is its goal? The Bible gives at least four answers.

To be made like Jesus in the image of God

We begin with an individual answer: we are “predestined to be conformed to the image of (God’s) Son” (Rom. 8:29). The Son of God is the flawless image of God, what humankind was meant to be (e.g. Col. 1:15). God is making each believer like Jesus. This is his great project in you and in me, if we are in Christ.

To be a part of a worldwide completed church

Next, there is a corporate answer: we are destined to be a part of “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). The Christian life is lived individually, one by one; but it is not, in its essence, a matter for the individual alone. God is bringing to completion the worldwide church of Christ through all the ages; and we are a part of that.

To share in ruling the new creation

The promise to Abraham is that in his seed (Christ and all who are in Christ) he will inherit the world (Rom. 4:13). The “saints” (believers) “will judge” (that is, govern) “the world” (1 Cor. 6:2). Although our inheritance is “kept in heaven for” us (1 Pet. 1:4), it will be enjoyed, in resurrection bodies, in the new creation, the heavens and earth made new (Rev. 21:5; cf. Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Pet. 3:10–13).

To shine to the glory of God

Most deeply, our destiny is to shine to the glory of God (e.g. Eph. 1:6). The universe will unite in wonder at the astonishing and glorious grace of God in the completed church of Christ. This is the greatest goal of the Christian life.

The Heart of the Christian Life

The Christian life is a matter of the heart before it concerns our words and deeds. From the heart flow the springs of all of life (Prov. 4:23). The corruption of the heart is at the root of all our problems (e.g. Mark 7:6, 7, 14–23). The healing of the desires and affections of the heart is the most significant affair of the Christian life. What passes for the “Christian life” but by-passes the desires of the heart can never be more than rank hypocrisy.

The Means of the Christian Life

The Christian life begins, continues, and ends entirely by the free unmerited grace of God, yet God has chosen to use instruments through which to bring his grace into our lives. The old-fashioned expression for these is “the means of grace.” We shall consider four.

The Scriptures

Psalm 1 declares a blessing on the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord” and who “meditates” on that law “day and night” (Ps. 1:2). The “law” of the Lord means his instruction, that is, the Scriptures. Jesus supremely is the man whose delight was in these Scriptures, during his life on earth (cf. Luke 2:41–51). These Scriptures, the Old Testament as read in the light of the New, and the New as prepared for by the Old, make us “wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 3:15); that is, they lead us in the way that leads to our final rescue. The Christian life is nurtured by the Bible, both read privately and in the life of the home, and heard publicly, especially in the preaching of the Scriptures to the local church.

The Church

In the fellowship of a local church, we stir one another up to love and good works. We encourage one another to wait for Jesus' return, to repent and believe day by day (cf. [Heb. 10:24–25](#)). Every Christian needs to belong to the fellowship of a local church.

Prayer

It is a very great privilege of the Christian life that “through (Jesus Christ) we both (Jew and Gentile) have access in one Spirit to the Father” ([Eph. 2:18](#)). We pray to the Father; we can have this access because by his sin-bearing death the Lord Jesus has opened the way; the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and enables us to use this privilege in prayer ([Rom. 8:26](#)). And so, “in everything” – all the trials and joys of the Christian life – “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving” we may bring our requests to God ([Phil. 4:6](#)).

The Sacraments

Jesus gave his church two visible sacraments, or signs of the gospel: baptism ([Matt. 28:19](#)) and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion (e.g. [Matt. 26:26–28](#); [1 Cor. 11:23–26](#)). Baptism is the sign of entry into the Christian life and the Lord's Supper signifies a continuing participation in the benefits of Christ's death for us. By these outward signs we are reassured of the trustworthiness of the gospel of Christ.

The Outworking of the Christian Life

The Spirit-Enabled Life

Paul writes to the Philippian church: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” ([Phil. 2:12](#)). God works in us, but he does not pull the strings as if we were puppets; he works in us by his Spirit so that we begin to “will” (to desire or want) and then to “work” in ways that please God. We “work out” (in the sense of “outworking” or putting into practice) what God first “works in” us.

In [Romans 8:1–14](#) the apostle Paul sketches out for us, in broad strokes, the difference Christ makes in terms of practical living. Life without God, before salvation, was dominated by sin and “the flesh.” We lived not with godward aims but for ourselves. But in Christ a new controlling factor has taken over; we are no longer “in the flesh” but “in the Spirit”, “led by the Spirit” (v. 14) into righteousness. This is the “gift of the Spirit” mentioned above. With his enablement, we are now free to live unto God as the following paragraphs describe.

We consider five aspects of this each of which characterizes a healthy Christian life.

Faith and Obedience

Faith in Scripture is more than a cognitive assent or agreement that certain things are true. Authentic faith is inseparable from obedience. Paul writes of “the obedience of faith” ([Rom. 1:5](#); [16:26](#)). James agrees with Paul and insists that a so-called “faith” that does not involve obedience to the law of God is not a true faith ([James 2:14–26](#)). The outworking of the life of faith will be shaped by the law of God, and especially the grand moral principles summarized in the Ten Commandments ([Exod. 20:1–17](#)).

The Christian life takes seriously the commandment to love God and love neighbor (e.g. [Matt. 22:37-39](#)). This is at heart one commandment, not two distinct commandments: we love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength; and the outworking of genuine love for God will be a love for the neighbor whom God sets before us. This includes our close family and those who live in our locality, but also many others, in the workplace, in our nations, and in the world.

Godliness and Good Works

Closely allied to “the obedience of faith” is a life of practical godliness, of good works. The letter to Titus emphasizes this aspect of the Christian life. Titus himself is to be “a model of good works” while teaching that Jesus Christ our Savior “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” ([Titus 2:7, 14](#)). This is not legalism, which is the attempt to gain a righteous standing before God through our good works; it is the out-working of the redemption that is given us entirely by grace.

Self-denial and Sacrifice

Another way of speaking of the outworking of the Christian life is that it involves denial of self. “If anyone would come after me,” says the Lord Jesus immediately after speaking of his sufferings and crucifixion, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” ([Mark 8:34](#)).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” ([John 12:24](#)). Jesus speaks first of his own sacrifice; by his death he bears much fruit. But he speaks also to every man and woman who will follow him.

Giving

A beautiful outworking of the grace of God in the Christian is the grace of giving. This is entirely a willing and cheerful response to the grace God has given us in Jesus ([2 Cor. 8–9](#)).

The service of the gospel in Christian mission

When Jesus speaks of the denial of self, he goes on to promise that “whoever loses his life for my sake *and the gospel* will save it” ([Mark 8:35](#)). It is important to take seriously the Bible’s emphasis on the priority of the gospel of Christ. It is not enough for a Christian to read the Scriptures, to belong to a church, to pray, to live a life of godly piety, and to do good works. The highest form of love for neighbor will involve doing all he or she can to bring them the message of the gospel. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” says the risen Jesus. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” ([Matt 28:18–19](#)). Not every Christian will be a particularly gifted evangelist, but each Christian ought to be committed to evangelism and the work of Christian mission, both in their locality and throughout the world.

Conclusion

To live the Christian life, we do well to remember its gracious basis and its glorious goal. We rejoice daily in all that God has done for us in Jesus. In giving us his Son, God has, with the Son, given us all that we need for life and godliness ([Rom. 8:32](#); [2 Pet. 1:3](#)). We remember that, in its core, the Christian life is an affair of the heart. We gratefully make use of all the means God has given us to press home his grace to our hearts. And we gladly live out what God has first worked in us by his Spirit.

FURTHER READING

- Graham Beynon, *Heart Attitudes: Cultivating Life on the Inside*
- Ian Hamilton, *The Faith-Shaped Life*
- J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*
- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*
- Kevin DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot*
- Tim Chester, *The Ordinary Hero: Living the Cross and Resurrection*

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