

# Who Is A Christian?

What is the basis of our claim to be Christians? What does it mean to be a Christian? Can we say confidently “I am a Christian”, or should we say “I try to be a Christian” ?

In the introduction to his description of the life of Jesus on earth, the disciple John summarises who Jesus was, why he came and the responses which people made to him. See **John 1:1-18**. In two verses, **12–13**, he describes what happened when people responded positively to Jesus. The same responses bring the same results today and are the basis of our becoming ‘children of God’. There is a lot packed into these verses, so we need to take a closer look at some of the words John uses.

**Receive.** We seem to have a strange idea that ‘receiving’ is passive, something that happens to us, without our involvement. If we say that we were ‘on the receiving end’, we usually mean that an unwelcome event happened to us, probably against all our efforts. On the other hand, when we receive a present, we have to actively open it and own it before we have really received it. If you have been sent any letters or given any presents which you have left unopened, it is probably because you have decided that you don’t want what you think is inside the packaging or you don’t want to accept a gift from the giver. That is rejection and is the opposite of real receiving, which is actively taking something as our own. Similarly, the receiving of **verse 12** is the opposite of the rejection of **verse 11**. There are two groups of people here; those who reject the Lord Jesus Christ and those who actively receive him. He has presented himself to both groups but the responses and the results are very different. There doesn’t seem to be any middle ground – either we reject him or we receive him. One thing is clear; **you cannot become a child of God by accident**, only by actively receiving the Lord Jesus, taking him to yourself in response to his presenting himself to you.

What does ‘receiving’ the Lord Jesus, ‘taking him to yourself’ really mean? It is closely linked with the next word, ‘believe’, but it also underlines the need to make an active individual response, personally to take hold of the “*life which is the light of men*” (**verse 4**).

**Believe.** What an over-used and diluted word! We have often reduced it to just mean that we give a mental ‘OK’ to some information, perhaps without much concern. Sometimes we use it to mean that we

have been given some information which is a little uncertain, as in “I believe it is going to rain today”. Here in **John 1:12**, nothing could be more different. “*Those who believe in his name*” would be better translated (if a bit clumsily) as “*those who put their complete trust into his name*”. Our common ‘believing’ is like the person at the airport, watching aeroplanes taking off and landing, maybe very well informed about the theory of flight but not actually getting off the ground! New Testament believing is the sort of trust by which we board a plane, putting ourselves completely in the hands of the pilot and aircrew. We trust them to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Similarly, we cannot put **ourselves** in a right relationship with the holy God of all creation – our sins and our sinfulness get in the way. We have to completely entrust ourselves to the only one who can do it (and has done it!) on our behalf. You cannot keep the security of being on the ground at the same time as boarding the plane – you have to leave one to experience the other. Putting our full trust in the Lord Jesus Christ means that we stop trying to earn approval with God with our own attempts at ‘good works’ and rely completely on the grace of God to us in Jesus – forgiveness, the end of our old life and the start of our new life joined to him – all paid for with his blood, his broken body, his burial, resurrection and glorious ascension! **Have we really ‘believed in his name’?**

**Children of God.** But isn’t everybody a child of God? Evidently not, or else we would not need to ‘become’, would we? The Greek word for ‘child’ here is ‘tekonon’ – a ‘born one’. Our own children share our nature and we sometimes bore them by telling them who they ‘take after’ in our families – we enjoy seeing the similarities. God makes it clear that he wants children, not just servants. He wants us to share his nature, not just try to follow his rules. In fact, if we try to serve God without first making sure that we **are** his children, we will drive ourselves into an exhausting round of effort and failure, trying to be accepted by doing what he says, condemning ourselves to hopeless slavery. Jesus may only have talked directly to one person (Nicodemus) about being ‘born from above’ but the New Testament is full of the need for each one of us to enter into new life, to become those who share in God’s own nature. (See **2 Corinthians 5:17**, **2 Peter 1:4**.) In **1 John 5:10-13**, it is very clear. Either we have the Son (the Lord Jesus) or we don’t. If we do, we have eternal life; if not, then we don’t. In **verses 10** and **13** it is clear who ‘has the Son’ – those who believe in his name. **Becoming a child of God is not an optional extra for special Christians, it is what being a real Christian is all about.**

**The Right.** It is not often that the Bible talks about our rights but this is a glorious one, just where we need it – in the place where we might say “I couldn’t possibly presume to call myself a child of God!” “Oh yes, you can”, says the Lord, “if you meet the requirements.” And what are those requirements? Taking the Lord Jesus Christ to ourselves (receiving him) and entrusting ourselves completely to him (believing in his name). The Bible makes it very clear that **we can know for certain that we are born again as children of God.** The word for ‘right’ actually means ‘authority’. When our doubts (and Satan’s accusations) say “Who said you could call yourself a child of God?”, we can reply, “I am authorised by God himself!”

**Begotten and Born of God.** What a wonderful result! When we respond personally to the Lord Jesus Christ by taking him as our own and putting our trust in him and what he has done, what happens? A new life starts, and we can really call God our Father, as it is he who has given that life to us. In **2 Corinthians 5:17**, Paul describes it simply: *“If any one is in Christ – new creature! The old has gone and the new has come”*. Perhaps we can begin to understand better what it means to have ‘received’ Jesus; it means that my life is joined to his life in many ways. For example, he is the *“only begotten from the Father”* but in him I am also a child of God. There is lots more of our inheritance in Christ which the Lord longs to reveal to us, so that we can fully take hold of all that he has given us in his Son. Paul had the same ambition in **Philippians 3:12**.

**Not by Natural Inheritance.** Becoming a child of God has nothing to do with who our natural parents are. We have no right either to assume that we are Christians because our parents were, or that our own children will be believers just because we may be. Sadly, there are some folk who make these assumptions but John is quite clear:- **only being born of God makes you a Christian.**

**Not by Human Desire.** Some children are born ‘by accident’, as a result of normal sexual desire but without necessarily much planning! That is not the way it works in the family of God; you cannot become a child of God just because you feel like it, however strong the desire. Some people seem to think they can, though. They associate with Christians, change their language and lifestyle and really try hard to fit in. They may fool others, even perhaps themselves, but without being ‘born from above’ they have no place in the family of God.

**Not by Someone Else’s Decision.** We all know families in which the parents seem to have been determined to have a son or a daughter

and have gone on having more children (of the other gender!) until one of the 'right sort' comes along! One of my relatives had three girls before the 'son and heir' was born to continue the family name. The girls were all loved and treasured but it was clear that they were set on having a son, and he was born as a result of that determination. Men in New Testament times were just as intent on having an heir but God says becoming a child of his is not up to anyone else. We must be born of God. As Paul says in **1 Corinthians 1:30**, it is "by his doing you are in Christ Jesus". If God has not done it, then it has not been done. However, what security we have if we know that he has joined us to the life of his Son!

\* \* \* \* \*

We may find these words either very reassuring or very disturbing.

Imagine how a respected religious leader would have felt when Jesus told him that no-one could even see the kingdom of God unless they were reborn as children of God! Where did that leave him? All his religious observance and attempts to serve God left him standing at the starting line. Nicodemus had to leave that all behind and put his trust in Jesus. (See **John 3:1-21**.) We are not told directly whether he did or not, but the indications are that he ended up as a follower of Jesus, despite the opposition that it gave him among the other Pharisees. (See **John 7:45-52** and **19:38-42**.) If Jesus did not hesitate to confront such an upright, religious and orthodox man, what does he say to us if we hope to rely on our religious observance? The very same things!

Have we hesitated to be really certain that we are born into the family of God as his children, thinking that it would be presumptuous to do so? If so, we need to take hold of the **right** to become the children of God which he has given to those who receive him.

Have we seen all these things before but been diverted from basing our trust solely on what the Lord Jesus has done for us? How refreshing to be brought back again into an awareness that what God has done in our lives is real, that "*that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" !

*"His divine power has granted to us  
everything pertaining to life and godliness,  
through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory  
and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3)*

Dave Taylor

September 1998

Further copies can be downloaded from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)