

But I'm a Christian!

A Broadcast Presented by E. Lonnie Melashenko
Producer: Ken Wade

A well-known person said: "Come what may, I shall always love God, shall pray to him, shall remain faithful to the . . . church, and shall defend it even if I should be expelled from it." Who was this staunch believer in God and defender of the faith? The Nazi war criminal and head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler!

Tony Campolo tells a story of how he was mugged, at gunpoint, in an alley. While relieving him of his wallet, watch, and other expendables, the thief asked him how he earned a living.

"I'm a Baptist minister," Campolo answered.

"You're a Baptist?" replied the thief. "Wow, so am I!"

I don't know whether Tony was being facetious with this story. I assume that he was. But he makes an important point— one that could apply to folks in any church, including my own— about what it means to be a Christian. What kind of life do we live? What kind of behavior should be expected from us? What kind of people should we become? If Christians are mugging people at gunpoint, then something's surely wrong!

We have salvation, not through our works, but only through faith in Christ. Our good works cannot make us right with God. Instead, Jesus lived the only perfect life ever, the only life that was fully acceptable to

God, and the great news of the gospel is that His perfect life is credited to us. As sinful as our lives may have been, we can be accounted perfect and righteous because of Jesus' life.

God accepts Christ's life in the place of ours! And this wonderful provision is mine, is yours, through faith. We believe, and it's given to us. This is "justification by faith," the

greatest news any human being can ever hear.

Not Mere Assent

This faith isn't just an intellectual assent to facts about God, or Jesus, or even Jesus' death. Mere belief isn't "faith," or at least "faith" as the Bible describes it.

Anyone can claim to be a believer in Jesus, or to have faith; and anyone can be a member of a church, too. Dennis Rader, known as the BTK killer (for Bind, Torture, Kill) was the president of his local church council and one of the church's most steadfast members for 25 years!

When the Bible talks about faith, it's talking about something deeper, something more profound than a mere intellectual assent to facts. It's talking about something radically different, something life-changing. Christianity is about God changing our lives; it's about God bringing us forgiveness, healing, and restoration. And we all need some healing, we all need some forgiveness, we all need some restoration, don't we?

Look at these promises in God's Word:

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). (All texts are from KJV unless otherwise noted.)

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).



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“And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:23, 24).

Yes, God is in the business of changing us, of giving a new life in Him. What is this change? How does it come about? What does God do for those who have the kind of faith that the Bible talks about?

Complete Surrender

Saul of Tarsus lived almost two thousand years ago. He was a rabbi, a Pharisee, and a fervent foe of fellow Jews who believed in Jesus. Scripture records that he was involved in the stoning to death of one of these Jewish-Christians, a man called Stephen.

Then, one day, Saul set out for Damascus to find other followers of Jesus, most likely to put them to death, too. And as he made his journey . . .

“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked. ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do’” (Acts 22:6-10, NIV).

What happened? One minute he’s out to kill the followers of Jesus, the next moment He calls Jesus, “Lord.” One moment he’s working totally at cross purposes to Jesus, the next he is saying to Jesus, “What shall I do, Lord?”

For Saul of Tarsus—who was ready to kill the followers of Christ—to suddenly fall down before Christ and say, “What shall I do, Lord?” something dramatic had to happen to him. And something did. It’s called conversion. It was a complete death to self. Suddenly, his life, his old life, was gone, over. In a sense, Saul of Tarsus died that day and became a new man, known to the world as the Apostle Paul.

This isn’t a literal death, obviously. Of course not. Instead it’s

realizing that we can’t save ourselves, that we can’t change ourselves, and that left to ourselves there’s only sin, self, and ruin. It means a complete surrender of ourselves to God because we realize that without Him we are lost. That’s true biblical faith, the choice on our part to surrender to God, totally, completely, even if at times we stumble and fall.

Open to All

Of course, not everyone is going to have something so dramatic, so instantaneous, so full of bells-and-whistles, as Saul of Tarsus did on the road to Damascus. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you have the experience of surrendering of self to God, who will give you a new life in Him. And this experience is open to anyone, anywhere, who is willing to make the surrender to God, in faith.

This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote, “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Romans 6:8).

Or, “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3)

Or, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:11).

This death to self isn’t what saves you—it’s the outward

expression that you have been saved; that you have surrendered yourself, totally and completely, by faith, to Jesus Christ. This surrender doesn’t mean you’re sinless; it doesn’t mean you will never let self get in the way. No, this death means that you know you’re a sinner, that you know you can’t do it on your own, and that you know your only hope is in the power and mercy and grace of God.

Decades ago, half drunk and miserable in the back seat of his chauffeur-driven limousine, Coca-Cola magnate Asa Chandler Jr. was suddenly convicted by the Holy Spirit of his utter need for Jesus. That night—without the bells-and-whistles that Saul experienced—he chose to die to self and live for God. “The central thing in Christianity,” he later said, “is the final and total yielding of self, its renunciation and rejection and the entire surrender of the life to the way and will of God.”

Your Choice

Perhaps you’re hurting, fearful, wanting a changed life, wanting to start afresh. You can’t do it—No! But God can do it for you. God wants to do it for you. But you have to make the choice. You have to let go, you have to surrender to Him. You’ll have battles and you won’t always win those battles, but you’ll always be able to come back to the Lord for forgiveness and strength to keep moving forward.

A dog was trapped in a ravine along the side of a road. He was scared, howling, wanting to get out but was stuck. The harder he twisted the more pain he felt. Any-time anyone tried to get close enough to help, the dog, full of fear and pain, would bite them. And so the dog kept on howling, kept on trying to get free, but all it did was make things worse and worse for itself.

We, in a sense, can be like that dog. We need to realize our inability to free ourselves; we need to realize that often the harder we try, the worse we make our situation. That’s why we need to surrender to the only One who can help us, who can free us, who can pull us out of the ravine.

And that’s Jesus Christ, the One who already died for us, the One who rose for us, the One who’s there, reaching out into the ravine for each of us, and He’s saying, “Stop biting, stop fighting, surrender to Me, give it all to Me, and I will free you, and I will give you something better, something new.”

This message is one of 20 in a series, “The Just Shall Live,” to be presented on the VOP daily broadcast, June 19–July 14. Tune to a station in your area or listen online at www.vop.com.

What’s Your Priority?

*A Broadcast Presented by E. Lonnie Melashenko
Writer: Karl Haffner Producer: Ken Wade*

Elbert Hubbard claimed, “If your religion does not change you, then you should change your religion.” Indeed, authentic spirituality inevitably produces transformation. If you’re a Christian but you’re not becoming more like Jesus each day, then I’m sorry to say, your religion is worth a stack of Enron stock.

A story flying around the Internet tells of a man being tailgated by a stressed-out woman. He comes to an intersection just as the light turns yellow. He stops. This infuriates the woman behind him. She camps on her horn and punctuates the shrill noise with a few ungodly gestures. Suddenly she hears a policeman tapping on her window. He orders her out of the car and handcuffs her. Then he takes her to the station where she is fingerprinted, photographed, and locked up in a cell.

A couple of hours later, the arresting officer returns and sheepishly explains, “I’m very sorry for the mistake. Here’s what happened. I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing the horn and cursing and using bad gestures and then I noticed the ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ bumper sticker on your car and the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder and the ‘Follow Me to Sunday School’ window sign and the Christian fish emblem on your trunk. Naturally, I

assumed the car was stolen.”

The world is weary of people who have Christian bumper stickers on their cars, Christian fish signs on their trunks, Christian books on their shelves, Christian stations preset on their radios, Christian jewelry around their necks, Christian videos in their VCRs, and Christian magazines for their coffee tables, but do not have the love and joy of Christ in their hearts.



The apostle Peter reminds Christians that we are called to be different from the world. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10, NIV).

Chosen and Special

Peter invites us to experience the adventure of sanctification—the theological concept that describes the process of growing into the character of Christ. For this, we are chosen.

My friend, Karl Haffner, tells of preparing to pour a patio in his backyard. Standing in the middle of 17 tons of crushed stone, his five-year-old daughter picked up a rock and exclaimed, "Wow! Look Dad! I found a rock! It's my special rock!"

Karl examined the rock—which looked identical to the rest of the 17 tons they were standing in. "And what makes this rock special?" he asked.

"Well, look at it," his daughter insisted. "It's shaped like a tractor. And it looks kind of sparkly. And it's bigger than a lot of the other rocks."

Karl examined the rock and couldn't readily see the uniqueness, but he was quick to affirm his daughter's fondness for the rock. "Save it," he said. "That's a special rock because you chose it."

You, too, are special because God has chosen you. Nobody else has your smile or your personality or your exact interests. Peter says, "God has chosen you to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. He has chosen you to be light in this dark world. He has chosen you to receive mercy."

Remember: You are chosen. You are sanctified and growing into the character of Christ. You are chosen to be light in this dark world.

Shining Light

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote: "I am the light of the world," the founder of the Christian religion said. What a stupendous phrase! And how particularly marvelous today, when one is conscious of so much darkness in the world! 'Let your light shine before men,' he exhorted us. You know, sometimes . . . someone asks me what I most want, what I should most like to do in the little that remains of my life, and I always nowadays truthfully answer—and it is truthful—I should like my light to shine, even if only very fitfully, like a match struck in a dark, cavernous night and then flickering out."²

Peter tells us that we are chosen to let our lights shine, like a match in a dark, cavernous night.

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:11-12, NIV).

Peter exhorts us,

"You are a chosen people. You are sanctified. Now live like it."

The Bottom Line

An enthusiastic fan found himself in an elevator with Lee Iacocca, the retired chairman of Chrysler Corporation.

"Mr. Iacocca," the man bubbled, "I love your television commercials advertising Chrysler. My favorite is the one with you and your granddaughter. And that one with you and the rapper, Snoop Dog, is great."

Iacocca replied, "Sir, I couldn't care less of what you think of my commercials. What I want to know is what kind of car do you drive? Do you drive a Chrysler?"

That's the bottom line. You can advertise that you're a Christian; you can talk in a real churchy voice, but is Christ being formed in you? Is He driving every decision you make? Peter wonders: Do the pagans see Christ in you such that they glorify God in heaven? If this process of sanctification is not happening in a Christian's life, then the person is not an authentic follower of Christ.

Myron Augsburger writes, "The words holiness and sanctification are not prominent in much of Protestant theology. We have tended to speak of justification without a commensurate emphasis on sanctification. . . . Holiness means that one belongs wholly to God. This is also the meaning of sanctification, being set apart as God's own possession."³

Peter goes on to say that when this transformation takes place, pagans will notice Christians and consequently, glorify God. As Sheldon Vanauken puts it: "The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths."⁴

So may I meddle for a moment? What kind of a witness are you for Christ? When pagans see you do they naturally want to glorify God? Are you being sanctified? That is, are you becoming more and more



like Jesus each day? Are you being transformed into a new creation?

Hollywood Example

Here's a snapshot of what that looks like in real life. Stephen Baldwin is one of the famous Baldwin brothers from the family of Hollywood actors.

Stephen changed when he met Christ. Listen to his testimony: "I've never been as excited or happy about where I am in my life. There's no one I know in Hollywood who can say that."

Stephen's wife accepted Christ in 2000 and said, "I'm going to be serving Jesus now." Confused by her conversion, Stephen thought, Who does this Jesus think he is, coming around here?

But the events of September 11 changed Stephen's mind. He realized that the impossible was possible. Stephen says, "It made me say the Bible is true, and Jesus Christ could come back tomorrow."

How has his life changed? Stephen's work as an actor "has largely dried up." He won't work in a film that includes adultery, violence, or profanity.

He traded his Porsche for a Chevy Malibu.

Stephen spends his available time preaching the gospel. He directs

and hosts a DVD project aimed at reaching young people through extreme sports.

As for his marriage, Stephen and his wife are now "as one." Stephen truly is a new creation.⁵

It Can Happen to You

That's God's dream for every one of his children. He wants to make you into a new creation.

"What this means," Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!" (New Living Translation).

"A new life"—sounds inviting, doesn't it? The good news is that this miracle of sanctification can happen to you. How? It only happens if you are "in Christ" (NIV). Sanctification never happens by trying real hard to be good. It's not by trying hard to be like Jesus that we are transformed; rather, it happens by training. As we engage in training through the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, serving the poor, corporate worship, and so on, we are catapulted into the presence of Christ. It is there in the presence of He who is holy that we become holy.

Think about it this way: If you hear that someone is "into golf,"

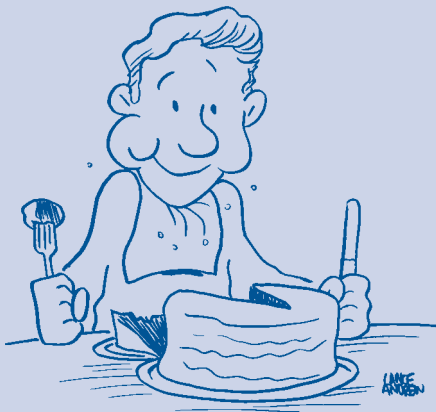
what does that mean? It probably means that this person subscribes to Golf Digest, studies "how-to" books on golf, practices putting, heads to the golf course every weekend—in other words, arranges life around the priority of maturing as a golfer.

So when Paul calls us to be "in Christ" what exactly does he mean? He is telling us to arrange our lives around the priority of maturing as Christians. That could involve subscribing to a good Christian magazine, studying God's manual, practicing Christ-like acts of compassion, and heading to church every week.

In the end, that's how sanctification happens. As we live in Christ, we become like Christ.

¹ Elbert Hubbard, *Leadership*, vol. 15, no. 4.
² Malcolm Muggeridge in "Jesus Rediscovered," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 11.
³ Myron S. Augsburger, "The Christ-Shaped Conscience," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 37, no. 3.
⁴ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1977, 85) as quoted from <http://www.swd.lcms.org/schools/prnews/prnews02-04.htm>.
⁵ "Baldwin's Great Awakening," *The Week* (11-5-04), p. 12.

This message is one of 15 in a series, "What's It All About?" to be presented on the VOP daily broadcast, May 29-June 16. Tune to a station in your area or listen online at www.vop.com.



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