

How to tell if someone is truly converted

Introduction

In many counselling sessions a discussion of a matter often turns on whether a certain person is really saved or not. This frequently affects family members who are presumed to be converted, but eventually it turns out that they are not. I believe this problem to be widespread. This leads to the situation of understanding how to determine if a person is a Christian or not.

Now we cannot ever know a person's spiritual status for certain since we would then have to see into a person's heart, which is the province of God alone. However, we should be able to see certain signs in a true believer and this informs how we fellowship with them. This judgment is vital. If we just presume that someone is a believer and treat them as such, we do them a great disservice if they are actually an unbeliever. Unbelievers need the Gospel not comfort. I believe that on the Last Day there will be many folk who will be shocked to see loved ones who will face God in their sins. This also leads to the question of our own guilt. If we are trusting that someone is converted when we should be preaching the Gospel to them, then we are guilty of their blood.

This means that if there is any doubt in our minds about someone we love, we must presume that they are not saved until we see definite signs otherwise. Thus we should pray for them every day to be saved and not fail in our responsibility. It also means that we should be very wary of young ones who responded to the Gospel at some emotional meeting by going forward in answer to an invitation. I have seen very many people accepted as a Christian by this method who, years later, turned out to be apostate. Yet thousands of people are accepted by churches as Christian every year by such invitation system methods; modern churches are full of them.

I will give some examples. I was once a close friend of a Christian couple where the husband was an elder in a small church. They had two teenage daughters who were very worldly, but nice kids. I was the godfather of the eldest. Both these girls had responded to an invitation at an emotional Charismatic meeting long before and were accepted by the parents as Christian; yet it was clear to all and sundry that they were not saved at all. Taking my responsibility seriously, on one visit I spoke to the eldest daughter about her sins and her need to get right with God. We had a good conversation and she wanted to know more.

However, the next day I was taken to one side by the father and told off. Apparently the girl had had nightmares that night and was worried about hell – in my opinion a very good thing. Being overprotective, I was forbidden to speak about the Gospel to this girl again as it was upsetting her, though she had not said that herself. I never got the chance again. Some time later while abroad at university she emailed me regarding life in general saying that she was not a Christian and could not talk about spiritual and personal matters to her parents but she could talk to me. We agreed to talk more when she returned (she was an adult by then and able to make her own choices); but sadly she met a young man, got married and lost interest.

To this day her parents think that she is saved because of her brief response to a Gospel invitation, even though she does not go to church, does not read a Bible, does not pray, indulges in worldly pursuits and has no Christian fellowship. These parents will have to give an account to God, one day, for their choices.

Another example regards a man who had been active in children's work in churches for many years. He was intelligent and rational; perhaps over-rational. However, he was continually depressed about his problems with habitual sin and often felt that he was not saved at all. He had also made a complete mess of his personal life in many ways. He approached doctrine in an intellectual fashion and subjected orthodoxy to his own subjective court of appeal. In other words, truth was what he felt it to be not what Scripture stated. A problem arose regarding a difficult doctrinal concept but which concerned a cardinal point of doctrine. Instead of submitting to both Scripture and historical confessions of faith, he denied both and felt that his error was more acceptable. Ultimately this led to confrontation in his church and after discussion, admonition, waiting and warnings he stubbornly refused to face the facts of Scripture and united church confessions and was dismissed from church fellowship pending his repentance. After this, more and more facts came to light showing deeper problems with this person that were serious in nature and his continued refusal to repent forces the conclusion that, despite a pious attitude in the past, there really was no true union with Christ.

A final example regards a woman who had been ostensibly saved for over 20 years. She was respected in the church community and had brought up three children who had all professed faith and had been baptised. She had been a leader's wife all of that time and was esteemed amongst other leader's wives; indeed she had a reputation of running a fine family. After a church trauma, which necessitated leaving that church, she became more and more worldly, gradually lost her faith and sought a worldly lifestyle feeling that she had previously made too many sacrifices. When opportunity arose she committed adultery and after a prolonged period left her husband and two young girls and went to live with a man to have an affluent lifestyle many miles away from her family. Nearly twenty years later she has showed no signs of remorse or grief, has no intent on repentance and denies her religious experiences. Clearly this woman cannot ever have been a Christian since Scripture tells us that there are no adulterers in the kingdom.

It is my conviction that these examples are not in the slightest way unusual and that modern churches are filled with merely professing Christians due to the proclamation of a dumbed-down Gospel for decades. I believe that the proportion of genuine believers in the church would shock us if we knew the truth.

All this shows how crucial it is to come to a sensible place in determining whether a person is really saved or not. We must face facts and only consider a person to be saved if there are a number of observable fruits of salvation. This paper seeks to identify some of these fruits.

Signs of conversion

Responses to God

A genuine love for Jesus

If God were your Father, you would love Me. Jn 8:42

First and foremost is the fact that true believers will love the Lord Jesus Christ. A person may be immature in knowledge of the truth and may struggle with many weaknesses, but a true believer will always genuinely love the Lord from the heart. If there is no true love for the Lord then there cannot be any life.

A desire to serve God

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. 1 Thess 1:9

Genuine Christians will want to serve God in some capacity. They may fail in this, their efforts may be small, weak and unsuccessful, but their constant desire is to serve God. Such desire to serve is evidence of salvation.

A desire to foster the kingdom of God

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Matt 6:33

Christians will love the brethren and love the church; thus they will desire that the church prospers and God's kingdom is extended. Part of this is expressed in a readiness to witness when possible, but it is also seen in a desire to serve the church in any number of capacities. Such folk will be hospitable, anxious to help the poor and needy, prepared to help those who labour in ministry and ready to do good to God's people in any way that he indicates. They will be prepared to give a defence of the church when confronted in society and always ready to witness to the Lordship of Christ.

Anticipation of Christ's return

This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven. Acts 1:11

He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Rev 22:20

Now the interpretations of the doctrine of Christ's return are many, varied and complicated. However, genuine Christians may hold any of these, albeit in error. Yet, despite much confusion in eschatological doctrines, all true Christians live in the constant expectation of the coming of Christ as the fulness of their hope in God. Genuine believers look forward to the Lord's return and set their hope upon the glory that is to be revealed. The Second Coming is an essential foundation of the life of the believer, whether he fully understands the details of the process or not.

Acknowledging God's sovereignty

She came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Lord'. Matt 15:25

There are levels as to how far Christians uphold this important doctrine. All Christians uphold the sovereignty of God to some degree but it has to be admitted that many believers come woefully short in appreciating how important this doctrine is. It is possible to be a Christian and only hold this doctrine in vague terms, but it is impossible for a Christian to fail to uphold it at all. The failure of believers to fully understand the sovereignty of God is due to the prevalence of poor teaching, or bad teaching, on the matter. If you sit under Arminian ministry for any length of time you will be subject to the withering of this doctrine.

Submitting to the Lordship of Christ is a fundamental issue of conversion; if a person cannot call Jesus, 'Lord' then they are not believers at all. There is a doctrinal position prevalent in America where this is the case; it is to be condemned.

Reactions to people

A desire to witness

Walk in wisdom toward those *who are* outside, redeeming the time. *Let* your speech always *be* with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one. Col 4:5-6

Always *be* ready to *give* a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear. 1 Pt 3:15

A genuine Christian loves to share the good news that he has found in Christ. He is ever anxious to evangelise so that Christ is glorified. Now this does not mean that we are all gifted as evangelists, only some in the church have that gift from God, but we should all be

ready to give an account of our salvation and God's plan and seek to witness to the truth in Christ.

If a person never has any desire to witness at all, then there is something wrong.

A love for the brethren (not just meeting them)

If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also. 1 Jn 4:20-21

This is one of the most important and most obvious signs. John tells us that if a person does not love other believers then he cannot be a Christian at all but is dead in sins,

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death. 1 Jn 3:14

It is a wonderful thing to see a mixed group of people of varying personalities all love one another in a church gathering. This is rarely seen in the world where social clubs gather people of like minds. Social life in the world is based on homogeneity, but the church is a very mixed bunch of people. A number of important factors arise from this.

First, all attempts to introduce homogenous strategies into churches must be avoided, such as house groups for one type of people. The largest Charismatic church in Korea does this. There are house groups for doctors, house groups for young men, and so on. This denies the very principle of the church, which is a varied group of people called together in Christ. Equally anathema are churches that cater for just one national group within a pluralist society, such as the Black Pentecostal churches in London or Sudanese and Chinese churches elsewhere in southern England. Just look at the disciples, a less homogenous group could scarcely be imagined, yet they were united in Christ. The local church is full of all sorts of different people types who love each other.

Secondly, all types of people and all age groups must be equally at home in the church because all are to be loved and none ignored. In fact Paul tells us that the weakest members are to be given the most honour (1 Cor 12:22-24). In many modern churches some age ranges and some sorts of needy people are always ignored while the focus is upon the young people and middle class families. This is a disgrace and it is not love. In a church where the old, the challenging, the sick and the weak are ignored, one has good grounds to question whether this church is Christian at all.

Thirdly, it is love that is in view, not just social acceptance. For many people going to church is a necessary social gathering that involves a few nods and winks and never getting to know anybody properly. One meets everyone else once a week, says hello, and then all go separate ways. This is not love and it is not fellowship. On the other hand many in Charismatic churches get more socially involved and spend much time together doing pleasant things; but these churches are just large social clubs and there is no proper fellowship in these either.

Fellowship, *koinonia*, is where love is worked out. Fellowship, or sharing, is where love for the brethren is made manifest. This involves many aspects, just like a normal family. It involves commitment to be there for a person; commitment to support and cherish. It involves giving sacrificially of your time and resources to help your brethren. It involves commitment to pray for their needs and give of your substance where necessary. Sometimes it involves admonishment and correction to help them get back on the right path. It often involves hospitality. Fellowship is where giving and taking is always going on,

where the strengths of one person supplies the lack in another so that all support everyone else.

This sort of fellowship can only function in small churches which meet in homes and which act like families. Only in such small settings can the gifts of each person come to the fore to help all.

If there is no genuine love for the brethren leading to real fellowship, in a person, then there can be no spiritual life.

It must be stressed that what is in view is love for the brethren. Just going to church is not evidence of conversion. Furthermore, due to apostasy in many churches, many good Christians are unable to attend their local churches; but they still love the brethren.

Doing good works

Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. 1 Tim 6:18-19

Paul says that believers must be rich in good works; that is, believers are always involved in doing good and being willing to share generously. Such good works are a foundation for the time to come when God rewards saints for faithful service.

Consequently, any professing Christian who never performs good works is actively denying that they have salvation. 'Christians' who never do good to other people but live selfishly are not Christian at all.

Personal development

Faith

To demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He [God] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Rm 3:26

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. Jn 1:12

The foundational basis of being a child of God is believing in Christ; those who receive Christ, who become children of God, are those who believe in Christ. Faith is the basic position of conversion; in fact conversion proper is faith and repentance, the one leading to the other.

Faith is not mere assent but a complete trusting in Christ and appropriating him for yourself. Mere assent is what the heathen and devils do; they know Christ exists; but faith in Christ so as to receive him is an appropriation, not just believing in facts. People without true faith cannot be Christian.

A repentant life

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Rev 3:19

Those whom God loves as his children are chastened and disciplined; therefore those whom God chastens are those who continually repent. We repent because God shows us our failures and this is a sign of being God's child.

Repentance is a change of mind to go a different way and this is constantly required of God's children because we make many mistakes. Repentance is simply being transformed in the spirit of your mind to see God's will more effectively and redirect your behaviour as a

result. It is putting off the old man and putting on the new man. Those who truly love God are always doing this because the old man grows in corruption.

Those who deny the need to always be repenting are either exceedingly poor in doctrinal understanding or they are not saved at all. The man who never repents is not a believer. Repentance is not once only when you are converted, it is a lifelong process to go God's way and not your own.

Continuing in faith - perseverance

You have kept my command to persevere. Rev 3:10

One of the greatest signs of the true believer is that he perseveres. The man who falls away and never repents is not a believer and was never a believer.

History is full of examples of believers who underwent the most serious and continual problems in their lives. This is why the book of Job is in the Bible, in order to encourage saints to persevere because God is in control of the events in your life, no matter how hard they may seem. Despite these huge and painful traumas, true saints continue in faith and grow in their knowledge of God; trials only make them trust more. On the contrary, professing Christians fall away and give up after even a few minor problems, or even for just missing the things of the world. As Jesus explains in the parable of the sower,

These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. Mk 4:16-19

Now professing Christians can continue their masquerade for many years if the circumstances allow it, but eventually their weakness is exposed and they fall away. Make no mistake, only unbelievers turn away from the faith.

Manifesting the fruit of the Spirit

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Gal 5:22-23

True saints will manifest these traits of Christ by the Spirit as they mature in grace. They may fail from time to time but as they grow they more certainly manifest these character traits of the Lord. If a person never shows any of these signs at all, there is reason to suspect the certainty of his spiritual experience.

An active prayer life

Pray without ceasing. 1 Thess 5:17

No matter how busy modern people are trying to make ends meet, the true believer will always find time to pray, even if it is not as long as he would wish. There is an impelling force in the Christian to commune with God through prayer, not only to petition for needs but to communicate with his Father and worship. If there is no prayer life, there is no spiritual life.

Worship

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit. Phil 3:3

Genuine Christians worship God – plain and simple. Those who have truly known the grace of God, which comes to a person and saves him, are the ones who cannot but worship and give thanks to God. Now this is nothing to do with an emotional, loud, music driven

jamboree on a Sunday morning; that is not worship but emotional self-indulgence and entertainment. True worship is bowing the knee towards God in genuine submission and adoration. It is a quiet expression of the soul in subservience and commitment to God. This sort of worship should happen every day in the true believer, even if only for short periods, but the heart of the saint is always ready to praise God at all times.

Full of thanksgiving

Abounding in ... thanksgiving. ... Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving. Col 2:5, 4:2

I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. Jonah 2:9

Thanksgiving to God is one of the key signs of a true believer. He manages to do this in all circumstances, even in times of affliction (1 Thess 5:18).

Recognition of one's own sin

We all stumble in many things. Jm 3:2

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. Rm 7:21

Pharisaic behaviour is to arrogantly believe that one is righteous and good as a result of religious works. However, true Christianity, although it affirms justification by faith in Jesus Christ, teaches that we are always aware of our own shortcomings and sinfulness. We may be accepted by God in Christ as righteous and welcome in heaven, but our conscience always tells us that in actual fact we continually sin while on this earth. Thus James could say that we all make many mistakes and Paul could say that though he wants to do good, evil was always in him because his old nature was not yet removed, and won't be until the end.

Thus true Christians are aware of their sin and their many weaknesses. Yet many supposed Christians in history have maintained that they do not sin; some have even stated that they have been perfected. This is completely at odds with Scripture and common sense. People who deny that they sin in this life cannot be true Christians.

A love of the word (not just occasionally reading it)

Your word *is* a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Ps 119:105

Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious. 1 Pt 2:2-3

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Heb 5:12-14

The true believer loves the word of God. Some Christians legalistically read the Bible in the morning, or even perhaps just a daily reading portion from a magazine, and do this without life or enjoyment. This is a bad sign.

The true believer interacts with God's word and strives to understand it better each day because he sees his God manifest in its pages. The more he devours the word the more he feels invigorated, and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The Bible truly becomes to him a matter of life and death; the more he reads it the more he lives.

The Bible is like a light to the believer; it shines on his way and makes it clearer to follow. To be without Scripture is to be without light and thus the believer not only enjoys the

word but needs it to keep going. The Bible is, to the believer, meat and drink; it sustains him.

The person that has tasted the Lord's goodness automatically desires the milk of the word. Over time that desire leads to understanding the meat of the word as well as the milk. If a person does not have this desire to feed on God's word, that person's spiritual life is suspect.

Desire for the truth – development in Biblical doctrine

The entirety of your word *is* truth, and every one of your righteous judgments *endures* forever. Ps 119:160

Just as a child continually learns from his father and develops in human knowledge, so a child of God continually learns from his heavenly Father and develops in doctrinal understanding. Much of apostolic teaching is an exhortation to understand this principle and become mature in understanding.

Brethren, do not be children in understanding ... but in understanding be mature. 1 Cor 14:20

This means that there is a desire in all of God's children to learn more of the truth. Now how far this development goes varies enormously in individuals, but whatever type of person you are, there is a desire to learn more truth if you are really saved. You may not be a professor of theology but you always want more understanding.

Therefore, anyone who has no desire for growing in doctrinal understanding at all cannot be a true Christian.

Shunning of the world

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Jm 4:4

The true believer quickly learns to shun the principles of the world. Now this does not mean leaving the world, which is impossible, but being in the world but not of the world. If we did not mix with folk in the world we could not earn a living or preach the Gospel to the heathen.

Shunning the world, for instance, means not having the sort of ambition that drives most men in the business world. It means getting promotion by hard work and righteous methods, not by currying favour, lying, boasting, making bad alliances and being sycophantic to wicked men.

It means not letting the television rule the life of your kids, without restraints, so that they are brainwashed into accepting worldly ideas. It means teaching your children carefully the way of righteousness so that they don't pursue hobbies or career choices that are worldly.

Shunning the world means many things and individuals have to learn these for themselves over time. But deep in their heart, genuine saints do not want to ally with the enemy of God and, as they learn more, they allow certain activities they once enjoyed to fall away.

If a professed Christian is clearly at home in the world, enjoying all that it offers without discretion, then that person cannot be a true believer but is in allegiance with God's enemy.

Conclusion

We could continue to add more characteristics but there is enough here to make the point that genuine believers will manifest certain characteristics.

What may become apparent to readers of this paper is that churches are full of people who do not measure up to these fruits of salvation and that there are big questions over the validity of their spiritual experience. This is because many in the modern churches are not saved, having been drawn in by a false sense of security under a dumbed-down Gospel presentation. Far too many modern converts showed no remorse for sin, no conviction of sin and no repentance from sin and yet were accepted as saved because they repeated a dictated prayer, accepted a premise of a preacher, or fell down during an emotional meeting. Some modern evangelistic methods, such as the appalling Alpha Course, actually avoid really dealing with conviction of sin and actively encourage an emotional response. Such a program is a recipe for disaster and explains why the church is full of superficial believers.

God's true children will manifest the characteristics of their Father.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2011
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>