

The Distinguishing Characteristic of a Christian

What is it that most characterizes a follower of Jesus (aka, a Christian)? Many different answers are given to this question. Different forms of Christianity answer this question differently.

*In the outline below, I seek to list and categorize the more important ways in which different forms of Christianity answer the following question: **What is the most distinctive characteristic of a Christian? What distinguishes that an individual is a Christian?***

1. *Answers that are fundamentally wrongheaded and entirely false:*

1.1. **The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to control his life, circumstances, and environment through God-ordained practices (superstitions)**

1.1.1. Prayer, fasting, confession, the eucharist, relics, symbols, etc. used to...

A. protect him from harm, bring him prosperity, bring him happiness and success, etc.

1.2. **The follower of Jesus is one who practices various spiritual disciplines in order to bring about his own “spiritual formation.”**

1.2.1. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, meditation, voluntary poverty, bible study, journaling, etc. are practiced in order to bring about...

A. an alteration of one’s attitudes, desires, character, mindset, etc. in order to make him...

a. more godly, more spiritual, more righteous, stronger in faith, etc.

1.3. **The follower of Jesus is one who lives a life in pursuit of ecstatic experiences produced by God.**

1.3.1. The pursuit of speaking in tongues is the most common modern example.

1.3.2. The pursuit of any alleged manifestation of the Spirit of God that is of an extraordinary, obviously supernatural nature.

1.4. **The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to live a life punctuated by altered states of consciousness.**

1.4.1. Consciousness-altering meditation or contemplation, and emotion-altering worship are two important examples of the practices employed to bring about an altered state of consciousness.

1.5. **The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to live his life in “nearness” to God.**

1.5.1. Manufacturing a feeling or sense of God’s presence (practicing the nearness of God); forming a habitual feeling of being close to God.

2. *Answers that mistake non-essential pursuits for the core distinctive pursuit of a Jesus-follower:*

The pursuits identified in the answers below can be valid pursuits for a Jesus-follower; that is, they are not necessarily invalid.

But none of the pursuits identified in the answers below are essential pursuits for a Jesus-follower; that is, one can be an authentic Jesus-follower and not pursue any of these things.

None of the pursuits identified in the answers below, even when it is a valid pursuit, constitutes the most distinctive characteristic of a Jesus-follower.

2.1. The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to correct social injustice.

2.1.1. For some Christians, the essence of their faith is to champion the fight against some form of social injustice.

- A. Since this emphasis overlaps with Postmodern Secular Progressivist orthopraxy, this is more a borrowing from that religion than it is an outgrowth of their Christian faith.
- B. While some individuals may be called by God to devote their lives to a specific fight against a certain social injustice (e.g., the slave trade), this most certainly is NOT the center and essence of what being a follower of Jesus is all about. To maintain that it manifests a deep ignorance of the teaching of the Bible.

2.2. The follower of Jesus is one who champions orthodox doctrines and beliefs, and repudiates unorthodox doctrines and beliefs.

2.2.1. From the perspective of New Testament teaching, a right understanding of the truth is clearly important and much to be desired. However, the belief of the Jesus-follower is clearly expected to be much more than a mere intellectual understanding of what is accurate and true. Without an inward, existential commitment to live one's life in the light of the Truth, a mere intellectual grasp of the Truth is of no real value, no matter how accurate it is.

A. Those who most energetically insist on doctrinal orthodoxy typically conceive of faith as mere intellectual understanding and confession. They give little emphasis to inward, existential commitment.

2.2.2. It is not uncommon for a Christian to adopt the mindset that because he champions a truly "biblical" doctrinal system, he is most certainly righteous and acceptable in the eyes of God.

A. Some Christians make an entire industry out of heretic-hunting.

- a. Being able to spot and expose a heretic is, in their minds, a badge of the purity of their own faith and standing before God.

- b. Recently—in parallel to secular “woke” culture—there seems to be an uptick in people who are diligently on the lookout for heretics. (Or maybe I have just been blissfully unaware for a great while.)

2.3. The follower of Jesus is one who participates regularly in Christian ritual and liturgy.

- 2.3.1. Christians—particularly those who come from a high church background—will often think that the essence of their belief in Jesus amounts to routine participation in the important rituals or liturgical services of their church.
- 2.3.2. Assuming that the ritual or liturgy is supportive of what is true, there is, on the one hand, nothing wrong with participating in it. On the other hand, it is not essential or necessary either.
 - A. An authentic Jesus-follower could go his whole life without participating in any liturgy or ritual whatsoever.
 - a. Clearly, therefore, liturgy and ritual do not constitute the center and essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

2.4. The follower of Jesus is one who regularly practices meditation or worship.

- 2.4.1. That is, the follower of Jesus is one who regularly seeks to attain a feeling of adoration, gratitude, awe, or some other emotion in response to God.
 - A. It is most certainly valid to have a rationally appropriate emotional reaction to some truth about God. However, it is only appropriate if it is a spontaneous response to some truth with which one has been confronted.
 - a. There is no virtue or validity to manufacturing an emotional response out of some sense of obligation.
 - B. It is a huge mistake to think that experiencing such emotions is the center and essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

2.5. The follower of Jesus is one who engages in the disciplined practice of religious piety.

- 2.5.1. To pursue a regimen of helpful religious practices can certainly be valid.
 - A. E.g., Sabbath-keeping, bible study, prayer, gathering together with other believers for teaching, worship, and exhortation, etc.
 - 2.5.2. However, religious piety employed to signal to others how “righteous” I am is invalid and, in fact, evil.
 - 2.5.3. Even when it is valid, the practice of religious piety is certainly not the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.
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2.6. The follower of Jesus is one who engages in the disciplined practice of keeping the Mosaic Covenant, of practicing the Jewish religion.

2.6.1. To pursue a regimen of keeping the Mosaic Covenant is certainly valid for a Jew. And it can be valid for a Gentile, depending upon his purpose.

2.6.2. However, when keeping Torah is employed to signal to others how "righteous" I am, it is invalid and evil .

2.6.3. Even when it is valid, the practice of keeping Torah is certainly not the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

2.7. The follower of Jesus is one who engages in the disciplined practice of "good deeds."

2.7.1. It can certainly be valid to pursue a regimen of doing things that serve and benefit others.

A. E.g., feeding the poor, taking care of the ill, supporting the lonely and downtrodden, giving materially to those in need, giving aid to people in need, etc.

2.7.2. However, the doing of "good deeds" to signal to others how "righteous" I am is invalid and, in fact, evil.

2.7.3. Even when it is valid, the disciplined doing of "good deeds" is certainly not the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

a. When we think that the whole point of our faith is to "express the love of Jesus" by making a difference in the world, we have sorely missed the whole point of the biblical gospel.

2.8. The follower of Jesus is one who engages in the disciplined practice of moral piety.

2.8.1. It can certainly be valid to discipline myself to do things that foster and promote a righteous lifestyle and/or to avoid things that promote unrighteousness and immorality.

A. E.g., abstaining from alcohol, not listening to certain kinds of music, not watching certain kinds of movies, avoiding certain environments that are fraught with temptation, etc.

B. Or, alternatively, disciplining myself to fill up my life and time with morally wholesome pursuits.

2.8.2. However, practicing moral piety to signal to others how "righteous" I am is invalid and, in fact, evil.

2.8.3. Even when it is valid, practicing moral piety is certainly not the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

- a. When we think that whole point of our faith is to avoid going to R-rated movies and abstaining from alcohol, we have sorely missed the whole point of the biblical gospel.

2.9. The follower of Jesus is one who pursues a life of studying the Bible (or theology).

2.9.1. To seek a coherent, comprehensive, and accurate understanding of the message, worldview, and teaching of the Bible is a valuable and valid pursuit. However, *in and of itself*, it is not the center and essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

2.9.2. It is a deadly and damnable mistake—but not an uncommon one—to make biblical or theological studies a substitute for actual discipleship to Jesus. Far from being the essence of what it means to follow Jesus, when it is substituted for true discipleship, it is a diabolical distraction from following Jesus and a damnable evil.

A. Doing theology or bible study, when it is kept at a strictly intellectual level, has little to do with authentic belief in Jesus. Authentic belief in Jesus is an entirely different sort of thing from the intellectual system-building of a bible scholar or theologian.

a. Doing theology or bible study can be very rewarding in its own right. There is a tremendous reward and satisfaction that comes from meeting the intellectual challenge of solving the puzzles that must be solved in order to arrive at what the Bible actually teaches.

1. And, this intellectual challenge creates an arena for a challenging and engaging competition with others.

2. Hence, one can see why the prospect of substituting theology or bible study for actual discipleship can be a very seductive option. Theology and bible study can suck a person in and distract him from what the Truth is really all about.

3. *Answers that mistake a pursuit that is an essential component of what it means to follow Jesus for the very core, distinctive pursuit itself:*

Not only are the pursuits identified below valid pursuits for a Jesus-follower, but they are essential.

One cannot be an authentic Jesus-follower without engaging in each of the pursuits listed below.

However, none of the pursuits identified below—by itself, alone, in isolation—constitutes the most distinctive characteristic of a Jesus-follower.

3.1. The follower of Jesus is one who seeks an accurate understanding of the Truth.

3.2. The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to develop a mindset wherein he is always mindful of God.

3.3. The follower of Jesus is one who seeks to love others.

3.4. The follower of Jesus is one who pursues righteousness, purity, and goodness.

4. ***The answer that captures the Bible's teaching with respect to what is the most distinctive characteristic of a Jesus-follower:***

4.1. **THE FOLLOWER OF JESUS IS ONE WHO PURSUES *HOLINESS*.**

4.1.1. Or, the follower of Jesus is one who pursues *his own personal sanctification*.

4.2. The pursuits of the Jesus-follower who is pursuing holiness can be divided into two distinct categories:

4.2.1. Pursuits that are NOT distinctively "Christian" (that is, they are not unique to Jesus-followers *per se*), but are shared in common with every child of God throughout all time:

A. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who **seeks to know and understand the truth** in order to believe it and to commit to living in its light.

B. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who **seeks to take the reality of God into account** in everything he thinks, does, and desires.

a. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who seeks to love God "with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength."

1. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who seeks to live a life *in full awareness of the reality of God*.

C. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who **seeks to love others** out of a desire to imitate God's love.

D. The follower of Jesus (the child of God) is one who **seeks to pursue righteousness, purity, and goodness** in all that he does, out of a desire to do

a. God's will for how he lives his life.

4.2.2. The pursuit that IS distinctively "Christian" (that is, that is unique to Jesus-followers *per se*):

A. **THE FOLLOWER OF JESUS IS ONE WHO PLACES HIS *HOPE IN THE ADVOCACY OF JESUS*.**¹

1. This is the only pursuit in which Jesus is central to the pursuit itself. In all of the other pursuits, they would still have meaning and validity even if Jesus were not (or were no longer) in the picture. Any understanding of Christianity (that is, any understanding of biblical faith) that does not make Jesus the essential center of the believer's life does not accurately reflect the teaching of the Bible. Any understanding of Christianity that makes Jesus a mere sideshow is not biblical Christianity.