

## **Are evangelicals the only true Christians?**

It's not often stated aloud, but the subtext in many evangelical discussions of Christianity is that the only real Christians are evangelicals. For example, a recent mailing from an evangelical mission agency was headlined, "What's happening to Christianity in Europe?" The rest of the page decried the fact that in 16 countries of Europe "evangelicals account for 0.1 to 0.7% of the population." The clear implication is that Christianity is almost dead in these countries ... even though some have a *majority* population from Orthodox and other Christian denominations.

Let's think about this a minute. Like-minded people tend to join the same groups, and that's true of Christians also. African-American churches, for example, are frequently social and cultural havens as well as churches for black Christians. Charismatic Christians join charismatic churches. And so it is no surprise that evangelicals flock to evangelical churches and generally avoid more liberal churches.

Unfortunately, the controlling assumption – usually unstated – by many evangelicals is that members of other churches are not really Christians. I believe this attitude is unbiblical and damaging to the Kingdom of God.

Of course, some members of non-evangelical churches are probably not true believers, just as some members of evangelical churches are probably not true believers. And yes, there may be more genuine believers, proportionally, in evangelical churches, although it seems to me that only God can do that kind of accounting.

The idea that evangelicals are the only genuine Christians raises some important questions. First, if only evangelicals are real Christians, what are all the other non-evangelicals who profess to be Christians?

In traditional evangelical theology, when it comes to salvation, there are only two classes of

people, Christians and non-Christians, believers and unbelievers, the saved and the lost. There are no other categories. Therefore, if only evangelicals are true Christians, that means all non-evangelicals, whether they call themselves Christians or not, are in the same category as the worst unrepentant sinners you can imagine. They are all going to hell. Only evangelicals are on the road to heaven.

You probably won't hear this preached so starkly from most evangelical pulpits, but the logic is irrefutable. If only evangelicals are really Christians, then all others who call themselves Christians are damned.

Let's apply this conclusion to specific countries. *Operation World*, a highly-respected encyclopedic prayer guide, says that the population of the Dominican Republic is 94% Christian, but only 9.1% evangelical. For Germany, the figures are 64% Christian and 2.1% evangelical. And in the Philippines, 92.3% profess Christianity but only 12.4% are evangelicals.

Is *Operation World* way off-base? Is it true that the vast majority of those identifying themselves as Christian are wrong, and are really no better off, spiritually speaking, than self-proclaimed atheists? I don't think so.

A second question: How do evangelicals decide who is one of them; in other words, who is a Christian?

Except for some external lifestyle issues, most evangelicals seem to look for verbal clues in deciding whether other people or groups are Christian. Do they claim to be born again or evangelical? Do they talk about accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior? Do they cite Scriptures like John 3:16 or Rom. 10:9-10?

From a biblical standpoint, that is a curious answer to the question. Jesus himself, when questioned by disciples of John about whether he was the promised Messiah, did not answer that way. In fact, he did not make any claim about himself at all. Instead he said, "Go back and report

to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Mt. 11:4-5)

Jesus said, in other words, *you* answer the question whether I am the Messiah, based not on what I say but on what I do. This seems to be a biblical principle. Questions about the authenticity of faith are properly answered with *deeds*, not *words*.

Jesus made this clear in his Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who *does the will of my Father who is in heaven*.” (Mt. 7:21; emphasis added) In the same vein he answered a messenger who told him that his “mother and brothers” were waiting to speak to him. “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Jesus replied. Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever *does the will of my Father in heaven* is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mt. 12:47-50; emphasis added)

When individuals came to Jesus professing faith or seeking assurance, he often told them to *do something*. Thus, when an expert in Old Testament law asked Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus told the immortal story of the Good Samaritan and then said, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk. 10:25-37) When a rich young ruler asked Jesus the same question, he told him to sell all his property, give to the poor, and follow him. (Mt. 19:21; Mk. 10:21; Lk. 18:22) After Peter professed his love for Jesus three times, Jesus said each time, “Feed (or take care of) my sheep.” (Jn. 21:15-17)

Interestingly, when Jesus called his disciples, he didn’t say, “Believe in me.” He usually said, “Follow me.” This was his command to Peter and Andrew (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17); to Matthew (Mt. 9:9; Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27); to Philip (Jn. 1:43); and to the disciple who wanted to bury his father before following Jesus (Mt. 8:22; Lk. 9:59). In other words, they proved their faith in Jesus by getting

up and following him.

Proving faith by works is also shown in Jesus' dramatic description of the Final Judgment. Jesus is sitting on his throne, surrounded by shining angels. All the people of the world file up to him and are separated into two lines, one streaming off to the right into the glories of heaven and the other headed left into the punishment of hell.

The voice of Jesus rings out to all those going by on his right: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." Then he shouts to those on his left: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

What's the difference between those in the right line and those in the left? Are those on the right all evangelicals, with stirring testimonies of faith? And is everybody else in the left lane?

No, the different destinies at the Final Judgment are based on one thing only, what people *did* during their lives. Whether people are shunted to the right or the left depends on whether they did or did not perform good deeds for needy people. What kind of good deeds? Jesus gives six examples: Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming strangers, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners. (Mt. 25:31-46)

Finally, note that the question of deciding *who* is a Christian is not the same as asking *how* to become a Christian. Jesus himself answered that question in, e.g., Jn. 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*"

What it means to "believe in Jesus" is fleshed out in other Scriptures. The Apostle Paul, for example, explained, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and

are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” (Rom. 10:9-10)

This is the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul summarized the Gospel he preached, which he said was the Gospel they had received and by which they were saved: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.” 1 Cor. 15:3-6)

Some conclusions. One, we *become* a Christian by believing in Jesus; specifically, by believing in the facts and purpose of his life, death, and resurrection. We *prove* that we are Christians by living a life of good deeds, modeled on Christ’s life. In other words, *faith* demonstrated by *works* is the *sine qua non* of genuine Christianity.

Two, based on my experiences with members of non-evangelical churches, particularly during the last 35 years of working with the soup kitchen network of Newport County, there are probably far more true Christians in non-evangelical churches, and conversely, far fewer true Christians in evangelical churches, than most evangelicals imagine.

Three, judging the genuineness of other people’s faith is a frivolous diversion from what we are supposed to be doing with our time and energy, and may even be unbiblical (see Mt. 7:1-5). Instead, if we *believe* in Jesus, let’s get busy *doing* what he told us to do.

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