

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

Dr. George O. Wood

Acts 17:28-29 finds Paul the apostle completing his hearing before a Jewish king. The name Herod Agrippa. He has witnessed to him about being a Christian. Agrippa says to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?” Paul, standing there in chains bound as a prisoner before Agrippa says, “Short time or long I pray God not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

I feel especially moved this morning to speak on the subject of Why be a Christian? If you're here today and you've never made a commitment of your life, or never made a public commitment of your life to Jesus Christ, I want you to consider making that commitment in these moments that we have to share together.

When we moved from Missouri to southern California about seven years ago we priced homes in Newport Beach's Harborview Hills. At that time a three bedroom home sold for around \$42,500 with about 8% interest rate we wondered why anyone would ever buy a home that was priced so high. Those same houses now, some of them are selling in excess of \$300,000. Looking back we should have begged, borrowed, stolen – done whatever we could have to at least purchased one of them if not go in hock for the rest of our life to get more than one. If only we had known how much real estate would appreciate!

Probably you have had a similar experience sometime in your life. You looked back to a time when you missed a good deal. Anybody had that? Maybe it was yesterday's garage sale.

There is one decision I have made in life that I do not regret. The decision to become a Christian looks better and better every single day. I've been thinking about what some of the reasons are, if you're not a Christian why you should become a Christian. And if you are a Christian why you should know you're a Christian.

You should become a Christian because the Christian message is true. Paul says it explicitly in his letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians “For what I received I passed on to you of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to many.” That is truth. That happened. Jesus died for our sins. Jesus rose again from the dead. Jesus appeared to many. That is true.

All other religions are based on what their founders said. Christianity alone of all the world religions is based upon what its founder *did*. Jesus of Nazareth is the only person in all human history that died and rose again to an immortal life. Even the persons that Jesus raised from the dead were not raised to immortality. They were raised to mortality. Even Lazarus had to have died again. But Jesus was risen to immortality and we share in that because of him.

When Jesus is risen from the dead it validates every claim he ever made. Because no one ever has risen again from the dead that has been dead three days.

When Jesus does it, it establishes his right to say, I am the Son of God. It establishes his right to be the only savior. It establishes everything, which he says as truth. Because he vindicated his teaching by what he did.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

When other men have faced death in history they have been unsure. In the *Dialogues* of Plato, Plato reports Socrates' last words to the court that condemned him "And now it is time to go. I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unknown to all but God." With all of his grace, wisdom and insight into life Socrates did not have insight into the after life it remained a total unknown. He didn't know if it as better or worse or if it even existed.

Consider by contrast the words of Jesus "I came from the Father and entered the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." Jesus not only knew where he was going after his death and resurrection. He knew where he had been before he was born. "I came from the Father. I'm going to the Father."

Jesus stood on trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate and declared to him, "For this reason I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who's on the side of the truth listens to me." John 18:37. If you're on the side of truth you will listen to Jesus. Twice in these words to Pilate Jesus uses the definite article *the*. Only once does it show up in the English translation but it's there both times in the Greek. "I came to bear witness to the truth." When the Greeks used the definite article in front of a noun it lent specificity, it lent concreteness, it lent sharp focus and clarity to that noun. Jesus was not saying I came to testify to *a* truth, as though he only had a corner of a truth. It's *the* truth. The only, the specific. The truth I came to bear witness to.

Some people have given up on the idea of ever finding truth. You may be such a person. Pilate was a person like that. He had given up on the idea that anyone could ever have truth, absolute truth. It offends him that Jesus would say he has the truth. So when Jesus says he has the truth Pilate responds, "What is truth?" an almost sarcastic comment. It lacks the definite article *the*. What is truth? Jesus is saying, "I am the truth. Everyone who listens to the truth loves me," and Pilate is saying, "What is a truth?" Because he doesn't believe that truth can ever be so concrete and so real that someone can declare it and be it. So he dismisses Jesus with a kind of almost flippant question: What is truth?

The whole Christian message though rises or falls on the question of whether or not Jesus is risen from the dead and whether he is who he claims to be. And if he's not then the whole of Christianity is a fraud.

I appeal to you to become a Christian. Not first of all because Christianity or following Christ will give you a better way of life. It will do that. Not because following Christ will give you better strength to overcome your problems. It will do that. And not because following Christ will simply give you heaven. Although it will do that.

I appeal to you first to follow Christ because his way is the truth. And he is the truth.

The second reason you should become a Christian is because of the changes Jesus will make in your life and in your lifestyle.

The hymn writer said it well: what a wonderful change in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my heart.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

Two theological words govern our understanding of how Christ lives in us. One word is the word “positional.” And the other is the word “progressing.” Christ lives us positionally and Christ lives in us progressively.

When we use the word positional we mean that when Christ enters our lives when we ask him he instantly raises us to a level of righteousness that is his own level of righteousness and God the Father sees us as perfect. The life of Christ is dwelling in us. We have the divine nature. We need not do anything else other than receive the free gift of God’s grace to be totally free and acquitted and righteous in God’s eyes.

That’s the new birth experience.

But there is also the matter of Christ living in us progressively. God already in salvation sees us as perfect, the life of Christ dwelling in us. But we in ourselves still know there is change that has to go on. We see room for personality growth. Understanding this difference between Christ living in us positionally and progressively keeps us away from a false idea that once you become a Christian you never do anything wrong again. Some people say, I don’t want to become a Christian because I don’t believe I can be perfect if I become a Christian. I don’t want to try it and fail again.

Being a Christian isn’t doing it on your own; it’s letting Christ’s life live in you. It’s progressively seeing Christ work in you, the behavior changes and personality patterns that his life will create for you.

I want to be good, wholesome, loving and caring, sensitive, warm and authentic person. I believe the indwelling presence of Christ brings that as we follow him.

Some changes don’t take place overnight.

Jewel my wife was hospitalized. We got back from vacation and I had to put her in the hospital on Monday. She had a flare up of acute bronchitis. She was in the hospital till Thursday. I went in to see her on Tuesday morning. She’d spent the first night in the hospital and she still could hardly breathe. I could tell she was very frustrated. She just thought she’d get in there and get a quick shot and the IV was supposed to work and she’d be instantly all well again. She was extremely frustrated that things hadn’t happened like that. I said, “You’ve been ignoring the symptoms for a month. I told you to go to the doctor and get it taken care of but you let it build up. You expect that a month neglect can be cured with one quick fix. It’s taken you a while to get this way and it may take you a while to get different.”

That insight came to me. Christ does for some people clear up our problems instantaneously. But there are others of us we didn’t get mean overnight and we may not get un-mean overnight. We didn’t get selfish overnight and we may not get unselfish overnight. We better be on the way, though. That’s why I love what early Christians called themselves – people of the Way. The life of Christ living in us, changing us. And Christ’s life in us is like a powerful and potent seed. Once his life is planted in us it is going to grow; it is going to make changes. He is going to come in and his personality will indwell us.

I find it especially fascinating to observe how Christ goes about changing our lives. He relates to us out of love and encouragement. Rather than out of fear and threats and intimidation.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

I recently witnessed a beautiful example of this in our house this week. Our little poodle Sunshine has developed a bad back. At three years old you wouldn't expect him to have a bad back but I guess he thought in order to be a member of the Wood family he should have a bad back. You have to be very careful how you pick him up because he's sensitive and he protects that back. He'll snarl and if you're not careful sink his teeth into you real good. Family members are not except from this, if you go to pick him up and you're not doing it exactly right.

When we leave the home we have to place Sunshine in an enclosed area in the kitchen. Rather than going through all this bother of trying to pick him up we have now been resorting to a voice command and finger command. He goes into his place. This week he decided to pit his will against mine. When I said "Sunshine, come here." He just looked at me. I said "Sunshine, you come right here!" He raised his lip and showed a fang and growls. Being the calm loving person that I am I said "Sunshine! You get right here right now!" and he just showed his whole teeth, snarled, growled and his little body began shaking all over.

It struck me so funny. Here's this little dog in mortal fear. I've scared the wits out of him and he's just shaking at the tone of my voice. I started laughing and said to him, "Sunshine... Come here get in here..." and immediately he pops up and goes. He was waiting for my tone of voice to change before he would trust me to obey me.

Everything's got to have some theological insight. Some people think that God is trying to change them by yelling at them and threatening them. We hunker down in puny human defiance. All the while the Lord is softly and tenderly saying with love, You need to change. You need to change your attitude about that. You need to go to that person and not back out of your obligation. It's time to lay aside the hurt and unforgiveness in your life. The Lord calls us. He calls us tenderly. He wants to bring about in our life his wholesome inner life. The life of Christ in you so that we can say of ourselves what is typical of a person in whom Christ is living. They are moving towards making these affirmations: I am a loving person, I am a joyful person, I am a peace filled person, I am a patient person, I am a good person, I am a kind person, I am a faithful person, I am a gentle person, I am a self controlled person. Those fruit of the Spirit are manifestations of the character of Christ. Christ's life needs to live in you.

The third reason you need to become a Christian is you should become a Christian because you need power to get through and to overcome the tough spots of life.

I noticed in the news this past week the account of the suicide of the 37 year old. The gentleman had invested \$60,000 of his money and when the market went bananas on Monday he lost it as well as a lot of money of people who had trusted his council. He was scheduled to be married in September. But even the prospect of that was not enough to diminish the depression that he felt so he took a shot gun and committed suicide. How tragic. People go through down spots in their life and don't see anything beyond the down spots and don't have the power that's needed to get them through.

You may be here this morning and you could be suicidal. Maybe you've had some loss that has really numbed you and depressed you and made you feel like never laughing or loving again. Christ helps us get through tough spots. The losses of life. The losses of family members. A devastating illness. The loss of a job or a career. The loss of some dream. Financial reversal. Hurt inflicted by someone.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

In Romans 8:18-39 Paul tells us how the presence of Jesus in us helps us get through tough spots he tells us four things about tough spots.

He says first of all you must consider, as a Christian that every tough spot that you're facing is a way to suffering. But the weight of glory which is coming that God is going to reveal in the after, is going to be greater than any weight of agony you feel now, the coming glory. The weight of it outweighs any momentary suffering and tragedy.

He tells us secondly that as Christians we face the tough spots with the Holy Spirit praying in us. We have an intercessor praying in us. When we don't even know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit is praying within us according to God's will for our lives.

Third, he tells us that God is working everything out for the good in our life. Dr. Schuller has said it rightly: Turn your scars into stars. God is at work in the tragedies of our life to bring about good, which he can handle and bring to pass because he is the one who specializes in turning crucifixions into resurrections.

Fourth, Paul tells us that nothing can ever separate us from God. When we come to tough spots we may be separated from things and loved ones and the like. But nothing can ever separate us from God's love. You need to become a Christian because you need to get through life's tough times.

You need to become a Christian because you need to be a part of a large and caring family. When you become a Christian you gain an instant family filled with brothers and sisters, persons who confess Christ as Savior.

When I say the word "church," what's a one word definition you think of? Some people unfortunately would say different things. Their exposure to Christians maybe has not been the best. Or maybe they've only had a surface or a casual or stereotypic view of what Christians really are.

When I say the word church I think of people who care. I think of people who love you. And affirm you. I think of people who build you up. Who sympathize and empathize. I think of people who encourage and strengthen. And people who help you when you're down. People who care enough to be honest with you. People who see your potential. People who love God. That's the kind of positive family that we get involved in when we become a Christian.

I love the mother and father and brother and sister that the Lord gave me in my natural family. I had the privilege of being born to a Christian family. But I also loved the family that God gave me at the new birth.

We do not follow Christ by ourselves we follow him in association with others. And just like in your natural family you don't choose who your brothers and sisters are, you're simply born into the family, so it is in God's family. We're born with the people that God is calling to follow him.

The fifth reason why you should be a Christian is you need to become Christian in order to escape the wrath of God.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

People are sometimes confused by the word “wrath” when it applied to God. We know it’s a word used in the Bible but we’re uncomfortable with it. To some it carries the idea of God being hot-tempered, ticked off and in a surly kick-the-dog mood. Nobody wants to be around a person that acts like that. But such ideas about the wrath of God do not match what the Bible itself teaches us about God’s wrath. God’s wrath is simply his settled permanent disposition against all that is unwholesome. The Bible calls it unholy. I like the work unwholesome. All that is unlike him repels. It’s like electricity. It repels something that touches it. So the personality of God is such that that which is unwholesome, when it touches him it is repelled it cannot come into his presence because he is holy, unique, wonderful, loving. God’s wrath therefore is that force operative in his life, which repels that which is unlike himself.

That wrath is going on in three different ways. The Bible says the wrath of God is presently at work in human lives. Romans 1:18-32 says, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven now against all manner of ungodliness and immorality.” God’s wrath is going on right at this present moment. People are experiencing God’s wrath. You may be in this room and you’re experiencing God’s wrath right now.

How could you be experiencing God’s wrath? Romans 1 tells us that God’s wrath in the present moment is simply the fact that God lets you live with the consequences of your wrong decisions. When you make wrong decisions about God and wrong decisions about morality and wrong decisions about ethics and wrong decisions in your life. The wrath of God is simply not interposing some miracle so that you avoid the consequences. When you’re without Christ you live with the consequences.

*Time* magazine had a front page cover story during this last month on the wrath of God. Nobody saw the wrath of God but it was there. This lead cover story was on genital herpes. Twenty million Americans, one tenth of the population of America, suffering with genital herpes. The product of a society that has invested instead in immorality. What that social disease is, is a manifestation of God’s wrath in operation. God lets people live with the awesome consequences of their decision.

Pornographer Goldstein in *Time* magazine unknowingly quoted Romans 1, only he used his own words. He said, “It may be there’s a God in heaven carving out his pound of flesh for all our joys.” God indeed lets be exalted in us what our decisions were.

The wrath of God takes its toll on not only our body but upon our psyche. The person who is an angry person, always lashing out at people, the person who sows anger cannot have a peaceful personality. He cannot be at peace. If you’re a person sowing selfishness, you cannot be a giving person. You have nothing left but self if you reject God. God’s anger is going on. God’s wrath is letting you live with the consequences of your choices. That all can be changed if you choose to come to Christ. A whole new force begins to work in your life. The life of Christ in you begins to reverse those things.

The second way the Bible used the wrath of God is describing the wrath of God as the outpouring at the end of the tribulation of his judgment upon the antichrist, his followers and the whole world system.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

The third way that the wrath of God is used in the Bible is to describe the condition of those who are eternally banished from God's presence. Those who believe in Jesus are spared from the wrath of God, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through Jesus Christ."

Some people have a caricature view of hell as a giant stove outside of which God stands to stoke the coals, fan the bellows and keep the fire hot. But hell doesn't need God to keep the environment miserable. All hell needs is people and angels who don't want to serve God. Who want their own way and hell's awfulness is guaranteed. If people can create the despair of the slum, genocide camps in Europe and Asia, the kinds of atrocities the like of which we've seen in the Middle East, if people can create corrupt associations which terrorize people, inhumane societies and freedom hating tyrannies, people are perfectly capable without God and with the help of the devil to create hell. God doesn't have to stoke the fires of hell to keep it miserable. People will take care of that themselves with the help of the devil.

You experience the wrath of God when he withdraws his presence from your life. And hell short and simple is the absence of God. And without God, life comes unglued at the core. There can be no authenticity.

When Christians talk about being saved, it means there is something we are saved from. A trite term. It's become so trite to Christians: Are you saved? It means to be saved from something. We're saved from the wrath of God.

Six, you should become a Christian so you can spend eternity in heaven. That's the good news. Jesus himself promised us that the reason he went away into heaven is so he can prepare a place for us. That where he is we might be also. I have a hunch that Jesus is a good carpenter in the heavens. I always like the idea that his trade here in life was a carpenter. I have the feeling that it is just symptomatic of what he's doing in the heavens for us.

John in fact tells us that the place Christ is preparing will one day be the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride, adorned or beautifully dressed for her husband. The word "adorned or beautifully dressed" in the Greek can almost be transliterated into the English word cosmeticized. A beautiful bride coming down the aisle beautifully adorned. Cosmeticized. Her appearance, her hair, her facial features – everything. No more beautiful moment in a young lady's life than that moment when she comes through those doors and walks down the aisle, John says the city that Jesus is preparing is like that – cosmeticized, coming down from heaven for God's people.

The beauty of heaven is not only the splendor of the place but the people. You can have all the beautiful places in the world but if you don't have people to love and reach out to. It's a terrible place.

All God's people are going to be there. We'll meet Moses and Elijah and Peter and Paul and every man, woman, boy and girl that's ever walked with God. We'll meet God's holy angels – Gabriel and Michael and all the rest who serve him and do his bidding and guard his people. And best of all we'll see God himself face to face. There will be no more briars to separate us from other people, no more sea. There will be no more mourning, dying, darkness, greed, crime, death. None of those will be there. No one should miss him. No one should miss heaven.

## WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

My missing a good buy in Newport Beach a few years ago is drop in the ocean compared to the regret you'll feel if you miss heaven. Don't miss heaven. Don't miss heaven for all the world. Jesus himself said what good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his own life.

Seven, you should be a Christian because God loves you.

God loves you. Think about how much God loves you. "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." I tell you and you may think ill of me for this but I would think twice before I'd let my boy die for anybody in this room. I'd have a rough time with that. I'd wrestle between two contrasting principles. I honestly don't know what I'd do.

But I know what God the Father has done and I know what Christ the Son has done. He died for us. No one ever say Christ doesn't love you. Christ died for you. He died for me. Christ's death establishes how much God loves you.

When my children were gone this summer there were moments that were the pits. I got so lonely and depressed and I wanted to put my arms around them and tell them I loved them. And hug them. I thought, when God calls himself Father he's using the analogy we understand. He has the paternal instinct. He wants to reach out to all of his children and put his loving eternal arms around us and draw us to himself. He loves you. Oh how he loves you and me.

You should become a Christian. You should become a Christian because the Christian message is true. You should become a Christian because of the new life Christ brings to you. You should become Christian because you need power to overcome life's tough spots. You should become Christian because you need to belong to God's family. You should become a Christian because you need to escape the wrath of God. You should become a Christian because you should go to heaven. And you should become a Christian because God loves you.

It's so easy and simple and profound to become a Christian. Paul says, "The word is nigh you; it is on your lips and in your heart. What is that word? Jesus is Lord. If you will confess with your lips and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead you will be saved." The word is nigh you. Salvation is not far off. It's not in some other city, place, town or whatever. It's right here. It's on your lips and it's in your heart. If you believe Jesus is Lord.

I'm speaking to some people this morning that have never asked Jesus Christ into their life. I'm speaking to others who have never made a public confession, you've secretly believed but you've never identified yourself in a group. Stood up, walked an aisle, confessed that Jesus is your Lord. I'm speaking to other people who have done that. But especially if you have not received Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior, you should become a Christian. If you have never publicly confessed him before other people you should do that as a step in your walk with God. I want to give you a moment and an opportunity to do that.

I want us to bow our heads in a moment of prayer and if you say in your heart, pastor what you said is true and I want Christ to come into my life today and I want to be a Christian. What you say describes me exactly. I want you to stand where you are. I'm not going to ask you to do anything more than that. I want you to simply stand. By that standing, you're publicly acknowledging, yes, I want to follow Jesus Christ I want to become Christian. [end of tape]