



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Why Should I Be a Christian?

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Why should I be a Christian? A good question. One that evangelism, in its many forms, seeks to persuade people to answer in such a way that they feel impelled to be a Christian. I am aware that, in all the efforts to persuade, then main persuasion seems to be the promise of what I will receive in my life, and after my life, if I decide to be a Christian. I don't hear or read very much that tells me clearly what I am to believe or do in this life if I am Christian. I have read and heard a lot about what will happen to me if I don't make the right decision and do the right things.

Oh, I know the words of those messages. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Follow Jesus. Do what Jesus would do. Obey the commandments of God. Let the dead bury their own dead. You come and follow me. Sell all you have and give to the poor and come and follow me, etc., etc.

To what end?

Why should I be a Christian? What is the return to me? Or, indeed, is return to me the reason for becoming a Christian?

On a recent Sunday, I saw the TV programs of two of our nationally known and popular tele-evangelists. As I watched and listened, I realized more clearly than ever that, in the guise of winning people to Christ, they were pitching the enticement of the Of the promised benefits for being a Christian.

“Send us a contribution of \$20 or more,” one tele-evangelist said. He promised that my contribution would enable his TV ministry to stay on the air, and, he added, “We will send you a book that will help you.” I will be blessed – made well – receive special benefits – prosper. I will be so much better off than I have ever been, if I will just be a Christian.

Both programs introduced guests who witnessed in heart string tugging terms to the benefits that had come to them when they had finally decided to be Christians. This one was healed of an incurable illness. Another, having been fired, found a new job more rewarding than any he had ever had. A marriage was put back together. A wayward and lost child was restored to his loving and forgiving family. These things came about because those persons were – or became – Christian, and their prayers were answered.

I have no doubt but that all these, and many other good things happen in the lives of people who are Christians. I am glad that they do. In the light of these kinds of enticements, I'm not so sure just what my response should be to situations where people who are Christians do not get well. Or do not get the good job. Or do not put the marriage back together, or do not have the family unit restored. Or do not put the marriage back together, or do not have the family unit restored. Or do not receive the promised benefits.

It isn't just the TV preachers who “sell” Christianity on the basis of the benefits to

be received. Much of the religious literature that I read directly and indirectly offers the anticipated benefits as the reason for being a Christian. Much of the Church program materials about which I know does the same thing. Many of the conversations among Christians and would-be Christians that I hear tend to focus on benefits as a reason for being Christian.

Indeed, the promise of heaven after this life seems also to be a major reason for being a Christian.

Maybe the promised benefits aren't good reasons for being a Christian. Maybe there is another reason. Maybe that reason has to do with benefits I have already received, and what I decide to do in response to having received them.

So I ask myself, "What have I already received?"

As I think about the question, I wonder if I could ever complete the answer, or identify all that I have already received –

my life.

my gifts, abilities, talents.

a mind with which to think – search out – come to knowledge,  
understanding and belief.

capacity for emotions that enliven and enrich my life – that make me a  
feeling person.

the particular situation in which I live.

the unconditional love of God.

the way of life of Jesus. At least, I have access to it.

the gift of making decisions and acting on them.

opportunities – more than I can number.

But that points to another question. Whatever the benefits I have already received – these or any others – since I have already received them, why should I be a Christian?

All right, why should I?

As soon as I ask, I realize I am continuing to think in terms of the benefits I will receive if I am a Christian. I'm so accustomed to thinking in those terms that I don't shift easily into other ways of thinking. And besides, all those promised benefits are certainly attractive. Why would I risk giving them up?

However, I really want to try to shift my thinking and come to grips with answers to the question.

I wonder what it would look like if the appeal to me were to be Christian in response to the benefits I had already received, and not to gain, or assure myself of, the promised benefits.

I remind myself of the benefits I have already received. I already have God's unconditional love. God has already given me my life, my abilities, my opportunities, my capacities. God has already given me my world. So, what is so attractive about that? What can I do with me in my world?

One thing I can do is to decide to be a Christian.

But I continue to wonder what it means to be a Christian, and find myself, again, thinking about promised benefits. I don't want to do that. With some effort, I make myself stop thinking in those terms. I feel uncomfortable with the change I'm trying to make. It is so unfamiliar.

What does it really mean to be a Christian? I think about the word itself. Christian. People who were known to be identified with Jesus were called Christians very soon after he died. Why were those people called Christians? I guess it was because they saw themselves as followers of Jesus, who they believed was the sent one of God – the Christ. Since Christian means follower of Christ, it was logical.

Why did those people decide to follow Jesus? Why would anyone do that? Once again, I realized that I began to think about the promised benefits – my salvation, a good life, gaining heaven, etc. To stop that sequence, I turned my attention to what information we have about what happened to the first followers of Jesus.

Immediately, I realized that those first followers didn't seem to have received many benefits from following Jesus. They lived in fear of losing their own lives. They hid from the authorities. The promise of salvation, and of gaining heaven, and the promise of any future benefit, didn't seem to be a motivating factor. Something else impelled them. Indeed, Peter replied, when he was ordered not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18-20) Clearly, something very powerful impelled him.

Peter and the others took this position because of the rewards of being Christian? It doesn't seem likely.

So, why did they take this position?

After Jesus' death and resurrection, maybe Peter and the others took this position because they finally came to understand that what Jesus had lived and taught was the only truly satisfying life. Maybe they finally saw his love and care and wisdom, and knew they wanted to live in that same way. Maybe they reached the point of realizing what they had already received from God through Jesus, and desired only to live in response to those gifts as he had done. Maybe they wanted to be Christians and so live out who and what they believed Jesus to be, and themselves to be as followers of Jesus. Give what they had experienced, maybe there just wasn't any other way of life suitable to them.

In any case, I suggest that those people did not choose to follow Jesus to gain rewards nor to obtain promised benefit. They did choose to follow Jesus because of who they already were, what they had already received, and to respond to the opportunity to live by the same beliefs and practices as Jesus.

Maybe the same reasons apply to me.

I raise the question again. Why should I be a Christian?

For the disciples, Jesus, before his crucifixion and resurrection, was the leader. They had ideas, ambitions, and expectations, but they didn't have the responsibilities of leadership. They were followers, and not yet initiators. As followers, they had many opportunities to know about Jesus, his outlook on life, his way of life, and his message to the world. They could be Christians, and that meant to live in response to what they had already received. It meant to make use of what they had already received. It did not mean to be motivated by the promise of some future reward.

Though they are very different from those of the disciples, I certainly have any number of opportunities to know about Jesus – his beliefs, outlook on life, attitude, and messages. In my own experience, I can test the rightness and effectiveness of his way of life. Through observation, I can ascertain the impact of his way of life on the other people and on society in general when it is applied. If I see it as good and desirable, it would seem to follow that I would decide to live that way of life. I might even reach the point where I would say, "There is no other way for me. No matter what happens to me, I cannot keep from being a follower of Jesus." If I do, I want to be clear with myself that I do so in response to what I have already received, and am continually receiving, from God through Jesus.

I also want to be clear with myself that I do get benefits from being a Christian, call them rewards if you will. I can anticipate a full and satisfying life, even though I may experience hardship and suffering because of my faith and my practice.

Why should I be a Christian?

I should be a Christian because God has already blessed me.

I should be a Christian because I have already seen in Jesus what a full and satisfying life looks like – and it appeals to me. I want that life.

I should be a Christian because I am already a child of God to whom God has made known the full measure of God's unconditional love.

I should be a Christian because being a Christian is how I express my appreciation for and make fulfilling use of what I have already received from God. In the light of what I have already received, I don't need the promise of future benefits to persuade me to be Christian.

That is why I should be a Christian. That is why I choose to be a Christian.