

Becoming a Christian: The Art of Changing

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Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God. *Romans 12:2 TEV*

We are not born Christians, we *become* Christians. We make a conscious decision to follow Christ and then slowly we become Christ-like. We begin our journey with remorse, for it is only when we become fully aware of our unworthiness and history of sin that are we ready to emulate Christ. To ease our remorse, we confess our sins and then wash them away at our Baptism.

So what happens after the Baptism? The celebration is over. We are now clean. We are now committed. What happens next? Well, in the simplest of terms we must now CHANGE. We must *do* things differently. We must *think* differently, *communicate* differently, *love* differently. This is how we *become* Christians.

Changing ourselves is a slow process. As they like to say in 12-Step programs, it is “spiritual progress, rather than spiritual perfection.” Our best friend on the journey of change is the Holy Spirit. When Christ left he sent the Holy Spirit just for this purpose. She [or he if you prefer] is often referred to as the Counselor (*John 16: 7 RSV*) because she whispers in our ear at just the right moment. She tells us through feelings and intuition what to say, what to do, or how to feel—even if we don’t want to say, do or feel the way she wants us to. If our Love of Christ kicks in at this moment, we find the courage and strength to do as we are told and through this process we change.

The Bible gives us a list of things we must change about ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit. I could list all of these changes right now, but figuring them all out is part of your journey. As you study the Bible, attend church, and listen to the right people you will learn what has to be changed. I much prefer, at this time, to give you some advice about the process of changing—the steps you must take and the obstacles you must overcome.

Willingness: All change begins with willingness which is a gift from the Holy Spirit. The willingness to follow Christ is usually God’s gift to you when you surrender—a wedding present you might say. However, the willingness to *become* a Christian through a lifetime of obedience does not always materialize so quickly. If you have the willingness to begin your journey, but lack the willingness to stay on the path when the going gets rough, pray for it.

Stay focused on yourself: *You* are the one that needs to change, not other people. Don’t distract yourself by focusing on what needs to change around you. Look within and change any thoughts, behavior and values that are not in alignment with God’s will for you.

Stumbling blocks: Watch out for denial, defense mechanisms, perfectionism, rigidity, fear, stubbornness, depression, bonding to old habits, and your love of familiarity. All of these things inhibit change. Challenge each one of these stumbling blocks. Whittle away at them. Pray for God's help and then act as if they were not even there. For instance, if fear is your stumbling block, then pray and act "as if" the fear was not there.

Be ready to suffer: Some changes are painful. Accept this and be stoic. How does the pain manifest itself? Usually through anxiety or depression. Anxiety can make you nauseous and light headed. Depression takes away your will to live. These things usually occur when you are backed in a corner and need to change before you are ready. I felt this way when I had to end an abusive marriage. My point is this: Physical pain can accompany our fear of change. When this happens think about Christ on the cross. If he could suffer for us, we can suffer for him.

Positive thinking: I truly believe that if you change your mind, you change your life. So always strive to turn negative thinking into positive thoughts. This is an effort for many of us, but not impossible. Embrace the clichés. There *is* a silver lining to every cloud. There *is* a "bright side" to everything. We just have to look for it. (For Biblical affirmations read the Bible. They abound between the pages of the Good News.)

Gratitude: Gratitude is not a feeling, it is a way of looking at things that leads to a feeling of appreciation. We cannot change unless we are grateful. Gratitude dissipates resentment, self-pity, and sadness. When something goes wrong in your life, make a gratitude list. Write down (and ruminate on) all the things you are grateful for—no matter how small.

Moral inventory: Make a list of the most important changes that you have to make. You can stick the list on the refrigerator or hide it in the drawer. God does not care. Just remember to look at it once in awhile and check off a change or two before you get too much older. The list will help you stay focused. It will keep you from forgetting, which is a natural occurrence when you are trying to avoid something painful.

Confession: Be honest with yourself and the Lord about your weaknesses. Then get honest with another person. Tell someone what needs to be changed about yourself. Confession is good for the soul, but it is also the beginning of change.

Bible Study: Everything you need to know about how to become a Christian is in the Bible. Read it. Study it. Share it. (If you are a new Christian you will have questions and be troubled about some Biblical passages. If you go to a group led by your pastor, all your concerns can be set aside and your path will be clear.)

Healing the wounds of your past: Some people have been wounded by the past. They will not be able to change without the guidance of a counselor. Don't be afraid of this. God created the science of psychology just as he created the great surgeons who heal our bodies.

Building self-esteem: If you lack self-esteem, change will be hard. Open yourself up to the love of Christ. You are like a withered plant if you lack self-confidence. Let Christ's light shine upon you

and grow toward that light. Let his living water bring you back to life. (For more about building self-esteem see my article “It Is Not a Sin to Love Yourself” on my website brightertomorrow.net.)

Treating depression: Many people suffer a chemical imbalance that needs treatment. When the pain of clinical depression is eased, then change will come more easily. Do this in concert with qualified professionals (your pastor and your doctor), and always get a second opinion.

Forgiving others: Anger and resentment arrest change. You must forgive others and yourself if you are to change. Forgiveness is not optional, but it is all right to take your time. We are human and if we have been terribly wounded, then the wound must heal. Just never let the goal of forgiveness get out of sight. Always work toward that release. It pleases God if you keep trying no matter how long it takes.

Helping others: Helping others changes us. Altruism builds self-esteem. Charity brings us closer to the Lord. We all live by grace and what the Lord does for us we must do for others. In other words, to keep it we must give it away.

Progress: The Bible may ask us to be perfect, but I interpret that to mean that we *become* perfect. This implies that it is a process, one which (in my opinion) takes a lifetime. For goal-oriented people this may be discouraging. They want to arrive, to be finished, to take a break. Unfortunately, in my opinion, this cannot happen on our journey toward perfection. No matter how much we move forward, there is always more work to do. Therefore, in this life we must settle for progress or what I call living in the shadow of perfection. Let this be enough. Make peace with this if you are a perfectionist. After all, as long as we are imperfect we need the Lord at our side, and he is wonderful company.

In closing I would like to acknowledge that change is hard work. But we cannot serve the Lord unless we *become* better servants. I hope your journey is both successful and worth all the effort. I know mine has been. I am not the person I was. I am not the person I am going to be. I am growing and changing everyday and nothing makes me happier because I know this is what the Lord wants me to do.