

What does being Christian mean? The Word has been used loosely to cover so much. Some people consider themselves Christian because they were baptized twenty, thirty or forty years ago, even if they have done little with Christianity since. Some consider themselves Christian because they have had their names on a church roll for years, even if they have seldom darkened a church's door. Some consider themselves Christian because they come to church on Sunday, even though they do not let Christianity influence their lives during the week. These are all ways of dabbling with Christianity without really getting into it. We still ask, "What does being Christian really mean?"

Although the prophet Isaiah lived in pre-Christian times, he had an experience in 6: 1-8 that helps to answer our question. Isaiah has a moving encounter with the power of God. He comes to a new awareness of who God is and who he is in relation to God and that changes his life. He commits himself fully to living for the God he has come to know in a new way. That is also what it means to be Christian--responding to God's action for us by committing ourselves to living for him.

Isaiah is in the temple one day for routine worship. He probably expects this to be like any other temple visit. But God has other plans. Isaiah has a vision of God as an exalted king, sitting on a throne in the temple. The vision is full of supernatural elements. Strange creatures, which probably look as if they are half snake and half human, fly around praising God. The temple shakes and fills with smoke. But the supernatural features are secondary. The main point is that Isaiah has encountered God.

This has enormous impact on him. For one thing, he is terribly aware of his unworthiness before God. But God deals with this feeling. He assures Isaiah of his forgiveness when one of the creatures touches his lips with a hot coal. Then God puts forth a call for a prophet. Isaiah immediately responds: "Here I am! Send me." And his life is never the

same again.

Isaiah has been a believer in God. That is why he was in the temple in the first place. But now he is a follower of God in a new sense. He has personally experienced God and has devoted his life to serving God in a new way. .

That continues to happen today. People continue to have experiences in which they reach a new awareness of God. These experiences move beyond our normal Ways of learning about God. Usually we learn about him through the words of other people. Our parents tell us the first things we learn about God. Sunday school teachers and pastors add to our information. Other Christians sometimes talk about their religious beliefs. So we begin to believe in God's presence.

But most people have their own experiences that make their belief in God a very personal thing. These experiences vary as much as people do. There is no way to predict when they will happen to different people. Some people experience the presence of God as a result of dealing with life's problems. When they lose confidence in their abilities to cope, they find God present and able to help them. Some people experience the presence of God in certain worship occasions. Sunday after Sunday may be the same but one Sunday We feel the presence of God. Many people especially sense God's presence in the Lord's Supper. Regardless of how it happens the main point is that we come to a personal awareness of God. The book of Job described the experience long ago. Job said to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5).

When Isaiah experiences God in this way his life is changed. He totally commits himself to serving God. He can do that because he now knows God personally and knows that God is worth it. Have our experiences of God led to such commitment? If we have experienced God we do not have to be convinced that this is the route to go. We know

that it is.

What does commitment to God involve? It involves many areas of our life. I will describe just one now. Jesus made clear that commitment to God is reflected in the way we deal with the poor. We are to sacrifice ourselves for those weaker than us, as Jesus has done for us. That is an important call to us in our society. We have so much and we have so many ways to use it on ourselves. Advertising parades an endless string of products before us. We will never reach a level of income where there will not be more than we can buy.

But that approach leads us in the wrong direction. The question is not, "What can we still buy?" but "What do we need in order to live?" We need much less than advertising leads us to think. Americans can live simpler lives than we do. We need less food, energy and clothing than we use. Even less do we need the many luxuries on which we spend our incomes.

If we were to live simpler life-styles, there might be more money available for the poor because we will have more to give to the world's needy instead of spending it on ourselves. Also, resources that we do not waste will be available for people in other places.

Care for the poor is one way that we show our commitment to God. In many such ways we show that we have personally met God. Such meetings can be deeply disturbing; they make great changes in people's lives. But through them we grow toward lives that have more meaning.

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