

This is probably the most common misunderstanding about the Gospel. Most non-Christian Australians either believe that all good people are Christians or believe that Christians think that all good people are Christians. It is therefore not a red herring question but nearly always a genuine misunderstanding that needs to be clarified. Thus it is the kind of question that a Christian needs to ask the non-Christian or to at least provoke the non-Christian to ask.

1. Who Asks and Why?

This is the question of religious people, people who attend churches that do not preach the gospel. Liberal Christianity, Anglo Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, can all easily lead people into this error. It is particularly the error of the liberal minded ecumenical person who is concerned to include everybody. However, it is frequently found amongst the adherents of religious groups, even those who attend gospel preaching churches. It has as its basis the idea of self-justification and therefore it is attractive to the sinful heart. Nominally religious people also believe in this error. They believe it fervently for they have ceased to be active participants in Christian activity but yet do not want to disassociate themselves from Christianity. They think it is enough to be sincere or to do good. Thus they see themselves still within the category of Christian without having to put up with church services.

Even those who are not nominally religious think that Christianity teaches that all good people are Christians. Some dislike Christianity because of this. Others accept that Christianity or religion has a place in society in promoting morality and therefore is justified in claiming that good people are Christians. In some forms of the Australian rascal mythology there is a belief that all good people are Christians but who wants to be a Christian? It is hard to trace how this misunderstanding has come into our society but many centuries of universal approval towards Christianity has led to judging actions on the basis of being like Christ so that the good deed becomes the Christian deed. This is reflected in our language so that the definitions of 'Christian' in the Macquarie Dictionary are:

1. Pertaining to or derived from Jesus Christ, born c.4BC, crucified c.AD29, or His teachings.
2. Believing in or belonging to the religion of Jesus Christ.
3. Pertaining to Christianity or Christians.
4. Exhibiting a spirit, professing or following of Jesus Christ; Christ-like.
5. Colloquial: decent or respectable.
6. Colloquial: humane; not brutal.

2. What are the Issues at Stake?

This is a vital and important question to answer because the very nature of the Gospel itself is at stake. Built into the idea of what is a Christian is the question of who gets saved and on what basis. If no man can come to the Father but by Jesus then being a Jesus person becomes very important. What is being challenged by the question is the nature of authentic Christianity.

The basic misunderstanding is of the nature of sin. People who hold this view do not understand the severity, magnitude, universality and devastating consequences of sin. They have de-personalised relationship to God, reducing it to rule keeping. Furthermore, they have not grasped the idea of justification. It is no longer God justifying man in Christ Jesus nor man responding in faith to the gospel but rather God lowering His standards to accept the self-justification of man. Thus they have totally misunderstood the person and work of Christ. This is ultimately Christ-less Christianity. Christ becomes the good teacher who has shown us how to live or an irrelevant trapping of church teaching. There is no understanding of why He died as the one and only sacrifice for sins nor that it was necessary for God to be in Christ in order to reconcile the world to Himself. Thus the discussions of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus are seen to be irrelevant dogma, for any good man could have done what Jesus did. A question which can get rid of the person of Christ, the work of Christ, the nature of sin, the judgement of God, and the nature of justification, is a very handy tool for the non-Christian to wield!

3. How to Answer?

It is important when we answer the questions people are asking or we are posing to them, to promote the gospel itself. Each answer can lead on to other answers and questions that will take us towards the gospel or away from the gospel. It is always better to choose those that will lead towards the gospel.

Frequently therefore we need to give partial answers that will lead people on in their thinking. To give people the total answer the first time they ask the question is to almost assuredly bore them out of their brains. We can easily be like the person who when asked 'how are you'? actually answers! It is far better to give a little bit of the answer which is provocative enough to get the person asking more so that you can lead the discussion into a fuller understanding of the whole nature of the gospel.

It is important that the provocative half answer does not lead people into irrelevant red herrings. Thus one answer is the query about good Muslims or good Jews. If all good people are Christians how do you explain the good atheist? While this is an appropriate response, for it raises the most obvious difficulty with the assumption that all good people are Christians, it tends not to have the desired effect of leading people into a better understanding of the gospel. Rather, it tends to confirm them in their view that all good people are right with God and the trouble with churches and our kind of Christianity is that it tends to exclude good people like Jews and Muslims. The fact that Jews and Muslims do not want to be Christians is an irrelevance to most people.

The average Australian, whoever he may be, believes that Muslims and Jews are every much as Christian as the rest of us. So the discussion will bog itself down into: aren't all religions the same? This moves the conversation away from Christ.

Another answer on a similar line is to point out that not all Christians are good. You can recount the fact that you know many Christians who are actually rotten to the socks. Unfortunately this will lead into long accounts of the ways in which different church people have ripped off your non-Christian friend and his family. This will do little to commend the gospel! Furthermore, he will have now identified Christian as being a church person in order to demonstrate that authentic Christianity does not need to be church going. So far you have lost ground. Then how do we

answer the question?

4. The Bible's Teaching

It is important in this question to look at the Bible's teaching for the authenticity of your Christianity is being held in doubt. To have the Bible on your side is a great claim for authenticity, even amongst unbelievers. You can make the point that Christianity can be defined in any number of ways but if we want the Christianity of Christ then we need to go back to see what His words tell us. It is therefore helpful not only to talk about what the Bible says but to talk about what Jesus says.

You can even change definition and say: Well I am not really interested in Christianity I'm just interested in Jesus. Jesus has several words that are relevant to this topic. He comes to call the sinners not the righteous (Mark 2:13-17). He tells the parable of the unworthy servants (Luke 17:7-10), to demonstrate the impossibility of being good enough. He also gives the parable of the two men at prayer, the Pharisee who is good enough but condemned and the sinner, a tax collector whose repentance leads to mercy and justification (Luke 18:9-14). He challenges people about repentance (Luke 13:1-5) in a way which challenges the normal assumption about good people and bad people. The famous parable in Luke 15 of the prodigal son and especially of his elder brother can also be used as a telling illustration of Jesus preaching and saving the lost rather than rewarding the good.

However, the teaching of the Bible in its broadest scope, and not just the teaching of Jesus, needs to be examined. Passages such as Romans 3 which emphasise the universality of sin and the inability of man to be right with God are important for those who are confused about the good being saved. From Romans 3:19 to 3:20 we have a gathering together of Old Testament texts to demonstrate the universal sinfulness of mankind. Romans 3:23 is also fairly straight forward as a verse in explaining that all people are in fact sinners. Roman 6:23 is another verse of simplicity and clarity that enables people to see the consequences of sin and the person of Jesus as central to eternal life. That our response is to be faith not works is taught through the rest of chapters 3 and 4 of Romans. This is not always easy reading for the unbeliever. However, John 3:16 is one of the best known verses of the Scriptures and clearly emphasises belief in the Son of God as the basis of eternal life. Ephesians 2:8 & 9 also stresses faith and has the advantage of ruling out works. If you include verse 10 then you will be able to safeguard the common attack that justification by faith will lead to immorality. Verse 10 demonstrates that works follow salvation rather than precede it.

Dealing with religious people on this subject sometimes leads them to ask you questions about James chapter 2 and the relationship between faith and works. It is important therefore to have studied James chapter 2 and understood what is meant by dead faith. The simple image to use is the question of the horse and carriage, the train engine and the carriages, the importance of having things in their right order. Real faith will issue in good works, just as phony faith will not bring about any change in people's lives. However, good lives will not result in faith in God but rather faith in one's own goodness and therefore condemnation.

5. The Person and Work of Jesus

Those who believe that all good people are Christians do not have any understanding of who Jesus was and why He died. Yet their religious background will lead them to know that Jesus was crucified and that some Christians do treat Him as if He were God. Therefore to pose the questions as to why Jesus died, will draw out the inadequacy of a person's Christian understanding. Some will say in contradiction to Jesus' words that He had no choice in the matter, He was killed. Others will say as an example of self-sacrificial love to which we can ask how His love and example differs from the thousands of other martyrs for righteousness.

We can also ask why the New Testament places such emphasis upon His death or recount His resurrection. Galatians chapter 2:21 is a useful verse in this discussion. For it shows the pointlessness of the death of Jesus if it were possible to get right with God without Him. John 14:6 is also useful in talking of the centrality of the person of Jesus. These verses again demonstrate the authenticity of your claims to rightly understand Jesus and Christianity. However, it is verses such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:1-2, Romans 3:21-25 and Mark 10:45 which spell out the reasons for the death of Jesus. It is important to be able to explain the substitutionary nature of Jesus taking the wrath of God upon Himself in becoming a sin offering for us.

6. What is the Character of Good?

Often in this discussion the nature of good is confused. Good is a difficult word to analyse and is frequently used with different senses in the one discussion. It is worthwhile following the example of Jesus and locating good in terms of God's perfect will. Jesus does this with the rich young ruler. It is possible then to demonstrate that good means perfect. For how can a perfect God accept 51% of perfection? If God is perfect, then His requirements will have to be perfection. Frequently, we use good in a relative sense. That is, we use the word good to mean, better than your neighbour. However, to be better than your neighbour when your neighbour is no good is little comfort. There are many illustrations of this point such as the comparison of different mountains, one to another, compared to the distance to the moon. That Mt Everest is considerably higher than Mt Kosciusko is not to be denied. However, to stand on Mt Everest as opposed to standing on Mt Kosciusko will not bring you very much closer to the moon. Alternatively, you and I may set out to swim to New Zealand. I may be able to reach the headland of the beach from which we start while you may be able to reach 3 miles offshore; but neither of us has come anywhere near New Zealand. Another illustration is that of David Shepherd the cricketer who claimed that on one occasion he was stumped when three feet out of his crease, while on another occasion he was stumped only three inches out of his crease. On both occasions he was out for he had failed to come up to the judge's standards. The extent to which he was out is irrelevant.

Another way of tackling the issue of goodness is to raise the question of assurance of eternal life. If the basis of going to heaven is being good then can you be certain that you are now or will be in the future good enough? Who could ever claim to be a Christian if a Christian were a good enough person. Would not the claim be self-defeating? For if I claim to be a Christian I would claim to be good and therefore be proud and therefore not good. How could one ever be sufficiently good to think that we are going to heaven and not be arrogant at the same time. It is this point which makes non-Christians claim that all Christians are hypocritical. They hear us

saying that we are Christians, that is, we are good. They see that we are not good. They therefore claim that we do not live up to our profession. The church is full of hypocrites! However, we need to remind them that the church is not full of hypocrites but there is always room for a few more to come and therefore they should feel free to join us. Secondly, we need to remind them that the church meets together and confesses its sins, which is a fairly inappropriate thing to do if they all think they are sinless. That is, true Christians are not people who think that they are good and therefore assured of going to heaven but are very conscious of their sinfulness and of God's mercy thus assuring them of heaven.

Built into the confusion about goodness is the distinction between action and motives. Even the non-Christian can perceive that doing particular acts may not indicate right motives. Therefore I can help little old ladies across the road because I want to be kind to them or because I want to be mentioned in their will or because I want to bash them up and rob them on the other side of the road. The one action need not be universally and uniformly good. It depends upon the motives of the person doing the action. Thus to do good deeds in order to get myself to heaven or simply because they suit me is considerably less than doing them in order to bring glory and joy to God. To do good deeds in order to get to heaven is fundamentally different from doing good deeds because I have already been accepted into heaven. The non-Christian motivation for good is always godless at heart. This is reflected when we discuss the Ten Commandments. Most non-Christians are happy to obey the Ten Commandments until they are told what they are. The non-Christian reduces the Ten Commandments to: you shall not steal; you shall not murder and you shall not commit adultery. There is very little understanding of what covetousness means, there is some vague memory of honouring parents, there is massive confusion over what the Sabbath Day is and why we would keep it, but there is total ignorance of the idea that the first commandments are about God and His place in our lives.

7. The Good Pirate

One useful and telling illustration that has been borrowed and which you are free to borrow is that of the good pirate. It involves several steps. Firstly you need to spell out a description of a good sailor. He must not at this stage be called the pirate! Whatever constitutes goodness in people's ideas needs to be explained. This man is the perfect model sailor. Secondly, it needs to be pointed out that the ship upon which he sails is a pirate ship. That is, everything he does advances the cause of rebellion and piracy. In fact his very goodness only contributes the further development of piracy. If he were a bad sailor then he may actually hold the cause of piracy back. But because he is such a good sailor he is contributing even more to piracy. Thirdly, we need to see that the evaluation of a man's actions has more to do with his motivation and his relationship than just the actions themselves. Finally, it needs to be drawn as a parallel to our relationship with God. The key question is not what our individual actions involve but the direction in which our life is lived and the way in which we relate to God. To be a good person in opposition to God is to be in opposition to God. It matters little whether you fire a single shot or a machine gun. If you are in the enemy camp you are in the enemy camp!

Discussion Starter

Defend the claim that all good people go to hell and that the only people that go to heaven are

bad people.