

A central illustration of a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and black tie, standing with his eyes closed. He is surrounded by a circular arrangement of hands, each pointing directly at him. The hands are emerging from grey suit sleeves. The background is a gradient of blue and green, with a bright glow behind the man's head. The entire scene is framed by a thin white border.

BY MARTIN M. DAVIS

IF YOU WERE ACCUSED OF BEING A CHRISTIAN...

In a Sunday morning sermon many years ago, I heard the preacher ask, “If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” While many laughed nervously in response, I distinctly remember the feeling of guilt that overwhelmed me as I considered the unmistakable implications of his question: What are you doing to prove you are a Christian?

Following the surge of guilt, I was engulfed in shame as I began to contemplate the appalling lack of evidence to convict me of being a Christian. I didn't sing in the choir or teach Sunday School. I hadn't volunteered to go on a mission trip. I served on no committees. I refused to go to the men's fellowship breakfast because I was not interested in talking about deer hunting or football at 7:30 on Saturday morning.

Worst of all, I absolutely detested the thought of "witnessing." I hated joining others in my Sunday School class on Wednesday evenings to go knocking on someone's door unannounced to ask them if they knew Jesus—or worse, why they hadn't been in Sunday School lately. After a few moments of wallowing in guilt and shame, I concluded I was a washout as a Christian. No doubt I needed to say the "sinner's prayer" and be rebaptized, because there was little danger that some wild-eyed secularist would accuse me of being a Christian!

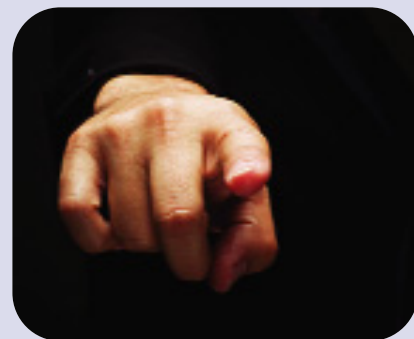
"Proving" Our Christianity?

As I think back on that fateful Sunday and the preacher's damning question, I wonder what the evidence might be that would convict one of being a Christian. Obviously, there must be something we are supposed to do that will prove to

all and sundry that we are among the chosen. Though the evidence may vary from group to group, surely there are some general guidelines we can follow to prove we are Christians.

Perhaps we could prove we are Christians by our attendance at church. Enough gold stars for perfect Sunday attendance would unequivocally prove that we are Christians. But then, the nagging doubt may arise that even perfect Sunday attendance may not provide sufficient proof to convict one of being a Christian. Perhaps perfect Sunday attendance supplemented by regular mid-week attendance would do the job. But who can say if regular church attendance is enough?

Perhaps we should sing in the choir, or if we lack good singing voices, maybe we should volunteer for nursery duty, or teach teen church or Sunday School. Doubt-



What are you doing to prove you are a Christian?

less, perfect attendance punctuated with a plethora of Sunday duties would provide plenty of evidence that we are Christians.

But what if perfect attendance and performing Sunday duties do not provide enough evidence to convict us of being Christians? What else might we do to prove we are the real thing? Perhaps there are things we should do off site, in our own homes even.

Perhaps we should initiate a morning quiet time, employing healthy doses of Oswald Chambers coupled with Scripture. But then, how long should it be? Is fifteen minutes enough to prove we are Christians? Or should it be thirty? Or even forty-five? But, then, what about my wife? She often leaves home before 5:00 A.M. in order to get to school to finish grading papers before her sixth-graders begin arriving soon after seven. I suppose that instead of getting up at 4:30, she could get up at 3:30 for morning quiet time. Surely that would prove she is a Christian.

"Proving" Our Faith by What We Don't Do?

After further thought, maybe it

After a few moments of wallowing in guilt and shame, I concluded I was a washout as a Christian.



Maybe we should give up beer, especially those cold frosty ones they serve along with corn dogs during hot summer ball games.

would be much easier to prove we are Christians by what we don't do. Maybe we should give up beer, especially those cold frosty ones they serve along with corn dogs during hot summer ball games. Or maybe we could promise the pastor we would never venture inside a casino, even if only to stick five-dollars-worth of quarters into a slot machine before heading for the buffet. Or maybe we could give up R-rated movies. Even better, we could go the extra mile and give up movies rated PG-13, as well. Surely that would provide enough evidence to convict us of being Christians.

Or maybe we should fast one day a week—or maybe two. Even better, like the desert monks of old, we could live inside hollow trees, flagellate ourselves, wear hair shirts and never bathe in order to show our disdain for the flesh, and thereby provide ample evidence to convict us of being Christians.

No doubt we begin to realize that the preacher's question is more complicated than it may have first appeared. Obviously, providing enough evidence to prove we are Christians can get convoluted in a hurry!

A Valid Question?

Today, in fact, I strongly contest the validity of the question. I think that, intended or not, the question is bound to shame its hearers, particularly those who don't teach Sunday School, sing in the choir or

serve on committees. Moreover, I now realize that the question hides an implicit *legalism* that suggests our Christianity is measured by *externals*. The evidence required to prove one is a Christian may be nothing more than adherence to a



prescribed set of rules, much like a recipe for Christian living.

We may fail to see, however, that even meticulous adherence to an external code of conduct is no guarantee that a person is a Christian. Remember the Pharisees of Je-

sus' day? They were the greatest rule-keepers in history. In fact, Jesus never disputed their ability to adhere to external codes of conduct. Nevertheless, he compared them to "white washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27). Not a pretty picture! Obviously, considering Jesus' harsh words about the Pharisees, we may conclude that there must be more to being a Christian than external behavior can evidence.

If Not Deeds, What About Creeds?

Since externals cannot provide trustworthy evidence to convict us of being Christians, perhaps we should look for internal evidence of our faith. Maybe a Christian is someone who believes a certain set of theological propositions. But whose theological propositions must we believe to prove we are Christians?

If we believe in the perseverance of the saints ("once saved always saved") does that mean that those who believe we can fall from grace are not Christians?

Where exactly do we draw the line between orthodoxy and heresy? Who makes that decision?

I am convinced that the measure of Christianity has little to do with doctrinal purity. To illustrate, my brother-in-law was, for decades, a

The indisputable proof that we are Christians is that we love each other as Christ loves us. It is as simple (and as difficult!) as that.

The new covenant reveals that we do not generate God's love; rather it is the Holy Spirit who produces the love of God within us, for love is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).



Love flows from God and into our lives so that we might share it with others.

member of a cult on the fringe of Christianity. At one time, his theology was different in many ways from mainstream Christianity. Yet I have never known anyone who loves God more or who seemed to set a better example of Christ-like love to his family, friends and employees.

On the other hand, as a seminary graduate, I have known others who held impeccable theological credentials but were uninspiring examples of what we shall see is the essential element of Christianity. George MacDonald, whom C.S. Lewis referred to as a mentor, said that an atheist who did the will of God was better off than a "believer" who did not. At least the atheist would not have to explain to Jesus why he called him Lord but did not do the things he said!

Do not misunderstand me. As one who holds to the teachings of

historical Christianity as expressed in the ancient creeds, I do not minimize the importance of doctrine.

Yet merely holding the "correct" doctrine does not make us Christians (remember, even the demons believe!). Obviously, the question is not as simple as the preacher who asked it years ago may have thought.

Our Fundamental Identity

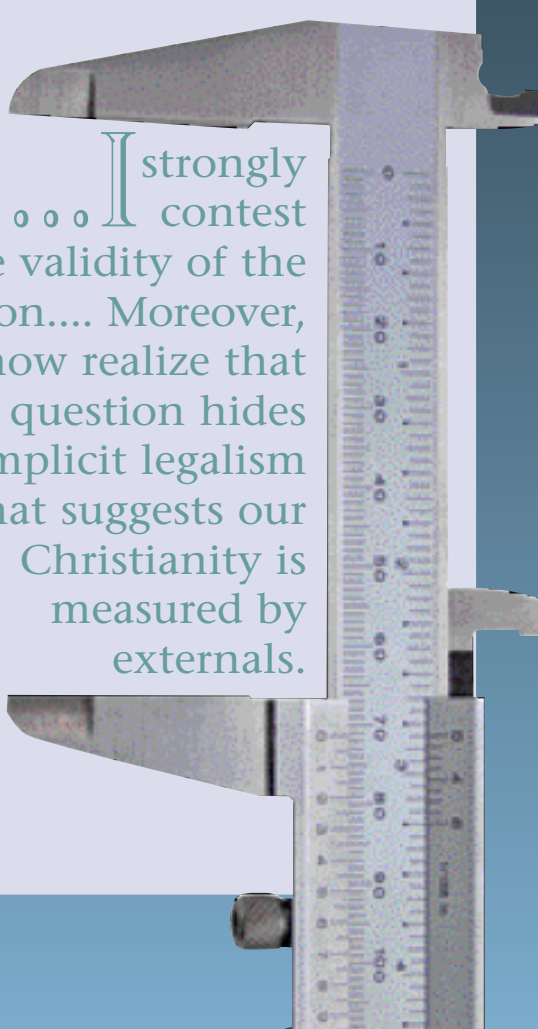
So, what is the evidence that would convict us of being Christians? Jesus himself provides the answer to the preacher's question. He gives us an irrefutable means to prove that we are Christians. He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34-35, emphasis added).

The indisputable proof that we are Christians is that we love each other as Christ loves us. It is as simple (and as difficult!) as that. Jesus Christ himself provides the supreme example of love by giving his life for us. "Greater love has no one than this," he said, "that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Not only in his sacrificial death, but also in his teachings

and practice, Jesus shows us how to live a life of love and, thus, prove that we are his disciples. Jesus offers some specific *examples* (not rules) of how we can demonstrate our love. He tells us to help those in need and to do it so privately and unostentatiously that not even our left hand will know what our right hand is doing (Matthew 6:1-4).

He instructs us not to judge others and to avoid beholding the speck in another's eye while we ignore the plank in our own (Matthew 7:1-5). He says that if someone wants to sue us and take our shirt, we should offer our coat, as well. He tells us that if someone compels us to go one mile, we should not hesitate to go another (Matthew 5:40-42). He even goes so far as to command us to love



I strongly contest the validity of the question.... Moreover, I now realize that the question hides an implicit legalism that suggests our Christianity is measured by externals.

our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-28).

The Apostle Paul encapsulates the spirit of Jesus' teaching in his unparalleled exposition of love. He writes, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Perhaps we could risk a daring paraphrase of what Paul is saying: "If I go to church three times a week, serve on six committees, teach Sunday School, sing in the choir and volunteer for mission trips to the Amazon—and have not love, I have missed the point."

Paul goes on to say, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Authentic Christianity

Perhaps after pondering Jesus' command to love, as well as Paul's description of what that kind of love looks like, we may wish that Christianity could be reduced to

Jesus shows us how to
live a life of love and,
thus, prove that we are
his disciples.



Like an explorer who treks through the wilderness guided by a compass, Christians who seek the way of Christ also use a compass, one whose needle always points in the direction of God's love.

mere externals like church attendance or refraining from alcohol. Nevertheless, Jesus gives us only two great, overarching commandments—he tells us to *love God* with all our heart, soul and mind, and

to *love our neighbor* as our self. According to Jesus, "All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:36-40).

All the rules and regulations, all the prescriptions for ethical behavior, all the evidence that could be used to convict us of being Christians can be reduced to one word: *love*.

Of course, the admonition to "love one another" can easily become yet another legalistic, performance-based requirement. The admonition is given, however, within the context of the new covenant. The new covenant teaches us that "God has poured out *his love* into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

The new covenant reveals that we do not generate God's love; rather it is the Holy Spirit who produces *the love of God within us*, for love is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Love flows from God and into our lives so that we might share it with others.

Like an explorer who treks through the wilderness guided by a compass, Christians who seek the way of Christ also use a compass, one whose needle always points in the direction of God's love. As we follow the path of love, empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of God to those around us, we will provide the evidence to convict us of being Christians. □

Martin M. Davis is an author and retired Family Therapist. To learn more about his book, Ashes into Gold: The Journey of Spirituality, just visit www.mannabooks.org or www.martinmdavis.blogspot.com.