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# What Is a Christian?

By Louis F. Post

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with heartfelt wishes  
for a Christian  
Christmas

Louis F. Post  
Washington DC

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# WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

By LOUIS F. POST

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IN the autumn of 1914 EVERYBODY'S MAGAZINE offered prizes for the five (afterward increased to six) best 500-word answers to the question, "What is a Christian?"—not an ideal Christian but an ACTUAL Christian; and the following answer was one of the six accepted and published.

It appeared in EVERYBODY'S for April, 1915.

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## What Is a Christian?

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YOU limit the question to "the actual," in contradistinction to the "ideal" Christian. But what is the actual Christian if not an ideal Christian in the making? Christianization is growth of the actual toward the ideal; and from a germ no larger, it may be, than a mustard seed. Of degree, as there is no point of growth from seed to blossom where one can say, "This is not actual mustard"—neither is there any stage of Christian effort where one may say, "This is not actual Christianity."

¶ In some respects—war, for instance, or capital punishment—many Christians repu-

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diate the Christian ideal. I am not alluding to hypocrites; they are so few as to be negligible. Nor am I thinking of paganistic Christians who worship the letter but ignore the spirit. I refer to Christians who sincerely try to let the Christian ideal regulate their lives in individual relationships, yet reverse it as to the common life.

¶ They are actual Christians in intercourse distinctly individual. We can not judge their motives, to be sure, but their actions would stand the test of "good works." They do not steal, nor murder, and they give alms abundantly. In other individual respects also they obey the second Great

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Commandment. But in common relationships—those of the social "solidarity," relationships in which the individual is submerged in the mass—they discredit the Christian ideal in conduct and explain it away in principle.

¶ This contradiction is at the heart of your question.

¶ It turns upon the conflict between individual unity and social unity. In individual concerns the Christian is hampered only by individual temptations; but in common affairs he is limited by the web and woof of the social fabric of which he is an integral part.

¶ To abstain from individual murder he has only his own

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murderous impulses to check. Not so if his government goes to war. Conscription or taxation, or both, will then coerce him.

¶ This contrast is true also of the predatory passion. From individual stealing he can refrain; but if his government upholds land monopoly, for instance, he must either prosper unjustly or be unjustly exploited — must steal or be stolen from. Such dilemmas are abundant. They generate social impulses in opposition to the Christian ideal; these react upon individual impulses; and out of it all there come, as to social affairs, Christian opinion and conduct inconsistent with the high ideal

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that Christians pursue in individual concerns. The resulting confusion evolves the enigma your question expresses.

¶ I offer this answer: An actual Christian is one who in individual concerns sincerely tries to practice the Christian ideal, and in common affairs sincerely tries to convert to the Christian ideal the social organism of which he is a part.



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