What Must Christians Believe?
by Servetus the Evangelical

Christians sometimes do not agree on what constitutes a genuine Christian. Yet most agree that a person must believe in Jesus. But what does it mean to believe in Jesus?

Jesus was a Jew. Jews believed that their God promised to send a king to deliver them from Gentile oppression, gather all Diaspora Jews to their ancestral land, and make Israel the chief of all nations in a worldwide government of peace. They identified this promised king as "the Messiah." Messiah translates *mashiach* in the Hebrew Scriptures, meaning "the anointed (one)." Thus, God would anoint this king with his Spirit.

Christians claim, and the New Testament (NT) affirms, that to be a Christian a person must believe that Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah. "Christ" is the English word for Messiah. The early Jewish believers in Jesus called him "Jesus the Christ." They soon dropped the definite article to form a new name for him—Jesus Christ. By calling him the Christ, they soon came to be called "Christians" (Acts 11.26). This label signifies, first and foremost, that these early believers in Jesus regarded him as the Christ.

Luke relates in his book of Acts about the evangelistic activities of these early Jewish Christians and the content of their message. He says as soon as the Apostle Paul was dramatically converted from being a hater of Christians to becoming one of them, he traveled about "proving that this Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9.22). It was his fundamental message. For Luke later informs that Paul was "solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18.5). Luke adds that Paul "powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (v. 28).

Christians also insist that to be a Christian one must believe Jesus is the Son of God. Indeed, the core message of the NT gospels is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Matthew 1.1, 16; Mark 1.1; Luke 1.32, 35; 2.11; John 20.31). Luke says Paul "began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9.20).

But what does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? Most Christians have understood it to mean that Jesus is God. They have believed he preexisted as the eternal Logos-Son and came down from heaven to earth to become a man, called "the incarnation."

It happened because church fathers erred in interpreting Jesus' status as the Son of God according to Greek metaphysics. They reasoned that just as a man procreates a son who becomes a man, so God generated a Son who must have been God as well.

Consequently, the Nicene Creed of 325 CE declares that Jesus is "very God of very God," also called "the deity of Christ." And this creed pronounces anathemas (curses) on those who deny this declaration. Popular American Presbyterian Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul asserts, "A denial of Christ's deity is the essence of unbelief."

No way! Gabriel announced to the virgin Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1.35). So, Jesus is the Son of God because God supernaturally accomplished his conception, which does not make him deity.

Christians also say a person must believe Jesus arose from the dead to be a Christian. The Apostle Peter made Jesus' resurrection the centerpiece of his evangelistic preaching (Acts 2.24, 32; 3.15; 4.10). And the Apostle Paul says Jesus' resurrection testifies to his being the Son of God (Romans 1.4). Paul defines the Christian gospel, saying that Christ

died for our sins, was buried, was raised from the dead, and that it is necessary to believe these things to be a genuine Christian (1 Corinthians 15.2-4).

Christians also claim you must believe Jesus is Lord in order to be saved. Paul wrote, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Romans 10.9). Indeed, "Jesus is Lord" was the first Christian creed (1 Corinthians 12.3). It means that people are real Christians if they let Jesus be Lord of their lives by living to some extent a lifestyle in obedience to him. He had said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7.21).

Most Christians also claim Christians must believe in Jesus as their Savior. That is, we must believe that Jesus died on the cross bearing our sins as a sacrificial atonement. Then God will forgive us, cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and make us a member of his family. An angel had announced at Jesus' birth, "today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2.11).

Jesus being the Savior is implied in his name. The Gospel of John says of him, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1.12). What does the name Jesus mean?

Jesus' name in Aramaic, his native language, is Yeshua or Yeshu. *Ye* is the shortened form of God's name, YHWH, translated Yahweh or Yehvah. *Shu*(*a*) means "to save" or "salvation." So, Yeshua means "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation." It means Yahweh saves through Jesus. An angel implied this when he said to Joseph in a dream that Mary, his soon-to-be wife, "will bear a Son and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1.21).

Must a person believe in Jesus' virgin birth (conception) to be a real Christian? The NT has two narratives about it (Matthew 1.18—2.12; Luke 1.26-56; 2.1-38), and it is important to soteriology. But the NT never mentions it again. Since it is not in the evangelistic messages or gospel definitions, it must be unnecessary to believe it.

In sum, the NT proclaims that to be saved, and thus be a real Christian, we must believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, he arose from the dead, and he is Savior and Lord of our lives; but it does not say we must believe Jesus is God.