Often-Asked Questions:

- The Christians I know are full of talk about love, but they are some of the most intolerant, selfish, and bigoted people I know. Why would I want anything to do with Christianity?
- Too many Christians I know are two-faced. If that's what Christianity is all about, why should I become a Christian?
- If Christians are really concerned about others, why don't they show it?
- Some non-Christians I know seem to live better lives than a lot of people who go to church—doesn't this show that Christianity isn't all it claims to be? How can people who profess to be Christians still be full of racial hatred, materialism, and social insensitivity?
- Many churchgoers seem to have holier-than-thou attitudes. Why should I join the ranks of the self-righteous?
For some, this is one of the most emotionally charged questions, right behind the question of Evil & Suffering. We need to listen well to hear whether this question is being asked because of the negative cultural stereotypes and historical blunders of Christians, or whether it is being asked because the person (or someone close to them) has been personally wronged by a supposed Christ-follower. In order to diffuse the anger that people feel about his issue, we must first empathize with them and admit that hypocrisy is an issue in the church.

Two Options

The underlying issue in this question is the implication that since Christians fall short, the truth claims of Christianity must also fall short. Does hypocritical behavior among those who profess to be Christians nullify the message about Christ? Some who have been disillusioned by the behavior of believers assume that it does, and they want no part of Christianity. The other possibility is that the truth of Christianity is not determined by the track record of adherents.

First Option: Hypocrisy Invalidates Christianity

Many delight in rehearsing the worst travesties perpetrated in the name of Christianity; for example, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem witch trials. They also turn to the present and point to examples of financial exploitation, adultery, and other forms of unethical behavior among church leaders. They conclude, therefore, that the entire church is full of all sorts of hypocrites, and they imply that Christianity is not true because it does not work.

Though we cannot agree that the church is full of hypocrites, we must acknowledge that there are some. We can’t deny the abuses and inconsistencies mentioned above, and we should quickly admit that the church is not immune to this problem. In his Pensees, Blaise Pascal wrote, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

Hypocrisy, then, is a problem in the church—and everywhere else virtues are valued. It would be wrong to condemn the medical profession because of wrong diagnoses and ineffective treatments, as well as certain instances of malpractice.

False assumptions. Three false assumptions are associated with this objection concerning the hypocrites, and they need to be exposed as such before the objection can be overcome. The first false assumption is that all sin or bad behavior is hypocrisy. While all hypocrisy is sin, not all sin is hypocrisy. Sin is a general term, and hypocrisy, like theft and slander, is a particular species of sin. In ancient Greece, the word hypokrisis referred to a “pretense” or an
“outward show.” Another word, *hypokrites*, meant “hypocrite, pretender” and was originally used to describe Greek actors who spoke through masks (the kind sometimes found on playbills and theater decorations) during their performances. Thus, the word came to be used of a person who was pretending to be something he was not. The hypocrite is living a lie because he makes a pretense of moral character that he does not possess. He carefully covers his faults so that others will have a higher opinion of him.

For a person to come to Christ on his terms, he must become the opposite of a hypocrite. That is, he must acknowledge his own lack of merit in God’s sight and accept the unmerited favor (grace) that God has provided in his gift of Christ’s righteousness to those who come to him. Before a person can embrace Christ as Savior, he must admit that he is a sinner. Jesus told the Pharisees, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). It is the man who thinks he is morally healthy before God apart from Christ who is the real hypocrite, because he considers himself righteous when he is in fact a transgressor of God’s moral law. “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his Word is not in us” (1 John 1:8, 10). Thus, while all Christians sin (1 John 1:8, 10), not all Christians are hypocrites.

The second false assumption is that *profession means possession*. Many people take it for granted that whoever claims to be a Christian must therefore be a Christian. But there is a great deal of difference between Christianity and “churchianity”; many church members are not members of the body of Christ. Being religious is not synonymous with having a relationship. The Pharisees were highly religious, but many of them did not know God. Profession does not mean possession.

When this objection about the hypocrites surfaces, it is important to be sure we are talking about real Christians—that is, those who have admitted their sinfulness and turned to Christ as their Savior. Anything of genuine value like money, jewels, and art can and will be counterfeited. But the fact that counterfeit money exists does not mean we should stop using money. Similarly, reproductions or forgeries of great paintings do not lessen the value of the genuine paintings. Church attendance, high moral standards, and religious profession do not make someone a biblical Christian any more than going to a ballpark makes a person a baseball player. This can help alleviate the problem raised by the hypocrite question because many of the misdeeds associated with Christianity are not accomplished by genuine Christians.

The third false assumption is that Christians claim to be perfect. Some non-Christians put Christians in a lose-lose situation. On the one hand,
they impose a double standard, expecting Christians to behave on a level that they themselves never think of attaining. On the other hand, they are offended by righteous behavior because of their inward sense of guilt. When their Christian friends behave in a godly manner, they assume it must be a show and equate piety with pretense.

But ethical behavior does not have to mean self-righteousness; one can be moral without being moralistic. In fact, a true Christian should be the first to admit that he is not perfect in his practice. Christians do not claim to be sinless, but they do claim to be perfectly forgiven.

It is clear from such passages as Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:13-26; Philippians 3:12-16; and 1 John 1:5-10 that Christians have not arrived at a state of complete Christlikeness. Until we see Christ “just as he is” (1 John 3:2) and become like him, no believer will be immune to the pull of various kinds of sins. We will fail, but this does not invalidate Christianity; it simply means that for a time we withdraw from our walk with Christ.

Thus, the real issue is not perfection but progression. The quality of a Christian’s life will fluctuate, but over a period of time it should progress toward increasing Christ-likeness. Unlike the hypocrite, this change is not an external veneer but is being wrought from the inside out.

So it is unwise to compare the life of one believer with the lives of others. It is more valid to compare what he is now with what he was before coming to Christ. If we met someone on the beach with an average physique who proudly told us about the terrific exercise program he has been following, we wouldn’t be terribly impressed. But if we found out that he had been a 97-pound weakling (or a 300 pound couch potato) only a few months before, our assessment of his exercise program would suddenly change. Similarly, some non-Christians are better adjusted people than some Christians, but this does not mean that Christianity is ineffective. Non-Christians may point to inconsistencies in the lives of Christians they know, especially new believers. But if they take a closer look, they will probably find that some real changes have actually taken place when they compare the believer’s present life with what it used to be before he became a Christian.

Even though the Spirit of God indwells and empowers believers, it is only too easy for us to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and grieve him (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30). When a true Christian fails to progress in his faith and leads a life of inconsistency or hypocrisy, he will begin to experience the firm but loving discipline of his heavenly Father. “God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Hebrews 12:7-8). Because God loves his children, “he disciplines us for our good, that we
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may share his holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). This divine training is designed to yield “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11) which will attract others to Christianity rather than repel them.

**Christ’s view of hypocrisy.** Only Christ used the word *hypocrite* in the New Testament, and he reserved his harshest words for those who fell into this category. Matthew 23 contains a frightening series of woes delivered by our Lord to the religious leaders of his day (the scribes and Pharisees) who made an outward display of godliness but inwardly did not know God. In their pomp and formalism, they sought the plaudits of men rather than the approval of God. Their self-righteousness prevented them from seeing their own sin. This is why Jesus told them, “You are like white-washed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also appear outwardly righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness…You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:27-28, 33).

Today also there are religious pretenders in the church who are fooling others and, just as tragically, fooling themselves. But God, who searches men’s hearts, cannot be deceived and will one day tell these modern-day Pharisees the awful words, “I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23).

Christ uttered these stern words not only because of the self-deceiving pride involved in such hypocrisy but also because of the great damage that hypocrisy causes. When religious fraud is exposed in the lives of ministers, many people become disillusioned and disappointed. Hypocrisy causes people to stumble, and the effects can be far-reaching.

Not only is Jesus adamantly opposed to hypocrisy in all its forms but so is the entire Bible. The prophets of the Old Testament continually denounced religious orthodoxy and formalism that lacked inner reality. The Lord denounced Judah through the Prophet Isaiah saying, “This people draw near with their words and honor me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from me, and their reverence for me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isaiah 29:13; also see Proverbs 26:23-26; Isaiah 1:13-17; Jeremiah 7:8-10; 9:8). Amos made this point abundantly clear in his oracle to the Northern Kingdom of Israel:

*I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).*
New Testament authors are also united in their opposition to religious hypocrisy and pretense. Paul describes certain people as “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these” (2 Timothy 3:5).

Writing to his coworker Titus, Paul says, “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed” (Titus 1:16; also see Romans 2:1, 3, 17-29; Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; James 1:22-26; 2:14-26; 2 Peter 2:17, 19; 1 John 1:6; 4:20; Jude 12-13; Revelation 2:9).

So the non-Christian who is opposed to religious hypocrisy actually agrees with Christ and the Bible on this point.

Second Option: Hypocrisy Does Not Invalidate Christianity

Christians do not claim to be perfect, but they do claim to be forgiven by the One who is perfect, Jesus Christ. Because of human frailty, inconsistency, and rebellion against God, the performance of the Christian church through the centuries has been far from ideal. But Christianity really stands or falls on the person of Christ, not the performance of Christians. If Christ was a hypocrite, the whole structure of Christianity crumbles into a heap.

The officers who were sent out by the chief priests and the Pharisees to seize Jesus returned empty-handed and said of him, “Never did a man speak the way this Man speaks” (John 7:46). Jesus spoke the noblest words ever spoken, and the standards he raised were so high that they were humanly unattainable. But in the life of Jesus, his words and works were a seamless piece; his precepts were perfectly matched by his practice. He spoke of loving one another and displayed unmatched compassion for people on every level. He spoke of servanthood and became the model of servanthood. He spoke of obedience to the will of his Father and walked every moment in complete dependence and submission to the life and will of God. He was the humblest and wisest man who ever lived, and in his character he perfectly realized the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. He spoke the truth and lived the truth, and when he publicly asked, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” no one was able to respond. His own disciples who lived with him day and night for more than three years declared him to be sinless (1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5).

Jesus was against hypocrisy, and his life was the antithesis of hypocrisy. Our job is to help those who raise the question of hypocrisy see that they actually agree with us and with Jesus on this issue. We need to tell them, “Jesus strongly denounced the hypocrites of his day and was the opposite of a hypocrite in his own life and character. Why should you let these people come between you and Christ?” No one ought to miss out on a relationship
with Jesus because of someone else’s inconsistency and hypocrisy. He offers his perfect righteousness to imperfect people who repent and turn to him. It would be foolish to let resentment against hypocritical behavior prevent you from receiving this priceless gift. Christ said that the religious hypocrites will not “escape the sentence of hell” (Matthew 23:33). Why plan to spend an eternity with them by rejecting Christ?

A great way to illustrate this point is with the following story:

Suppose I walk into the gas station with a ski mask on and gun in the air. As I instruct the clerk to empty the cash drawer, I announce that I am under orders from you not to leave any witnesses. When the drawer am empty, I unload two bullets into the clerk and make my getaway.

The police arrive moments later and find the clerk on the floor covered in blood and gasping for air.

“Can you give a description of your assailant?” The officer asks.

With his final breaths, the clerk weakly replies, “All I know is that [you] sent him.”

A few hours later four squad cars pull into your driveway and demand that you come out with your hands up. Totally disoriented, you demand an explanation. “Armed robbery and murder were committed in your name tonight at the gas station.”

Would it be fair for you to be locked away for life for crimes done in your name? Crimes that you would never have approved? Many things have been done in the name of Christ that directly contradict everything he stood for. Is it fair to condemn Christianity or Jesus Christ because of the things done in his name?

Sometimes the issue of hypocrisy is raised as an excuse for rejecting Christianity or as a dodge for avoiding a confrontation with the claims of Christ. When this happens, the objector should be brought as quickly as possible to the realization that the real issue is not the performance of Christians but the person of Christ. Religious pretense and abuses done in the name of Christianity are a problem, but they cannot be blamed on Christ or used to avoid one’s own problem of sin. That problem needs to be dealt with whether a person is troubled by hypocrites or not. The only solution to that problem is the work of Christ.

Summary

Many people have been disappointed and disillusioned by people who profess to be Christians but live ungodly lives. Some non-Christians claim that Christianity cannot be true because it doesn’t work—the church is full of hypocrites. There is no question that hypocrisy is a real problem and that there are many sources and forms of hypocrisy. But on closer examination,
the hypocrisy issue is not as devastating as it first appears. The word hypocrite applies to a person who pretends to be something he is not. But the prerequisite to becoming a genuine Christian is an open acknowledgment that one is sinful, not righteous.

In addition, we must correct three false assumptions to alleviate this objection. First, not all who profess to be Christians are in fact Christians. Second, real Christians do not claim to live perfect lives. Third, though believers sin, not all sin is hypocrisy. Furthermore, Christ himself denounced hypocrisy, and so does the entire Bible. Christ’s character was perfect, and this is the basis of Christianity, not the performance of Christians. We shouldn’t let the hypocrisy of some people become a barrier between the one who raises this objection and Christ.

**Supplemental Reading**


Study Guide for If Christianity Is True, Why Are There So Many Hypocrites?

What About the Hypocrites in the Church?

Hypocrisy Invalidates Christianity

- Hypocrisy is a real problem
- Sources and forms of hypocrisy
- Definition of hypocrisy

False Assumptions:
- All sin is hypocrisy
- Profession means possession
- Christians claim to be perfect

Christ denounces hypocrisy

Hypocrisy Does Not Invalidate Christianity

- Christianity stands on the person of Christ, not the performance of Christians
- Don’t let the sins of others keep you from Christ
Key Illustrations

Robbing a Gas Station

Suppose I walk into the gas station with a ski mask on and gun in the air. As I instruct the clerk to empty the cash drawer, I announce that I am under orders from you not to leave any witnesses. When the drawer is empty, I unload two bullets into the clerk and make my getaway.

The police arrive moments later and find the clerk on the floor covered in blood and gasping for air.

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Would it be fair for you to be locked away for life for crimes done in your name?

Key Verses

Matthew 23:23-36 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

27 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

29 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

33 You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

Isaiah 29:13 And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away. And their worship of me amounts to nothing more than human laws learned by rote.

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. 23 On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' 24 But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.

Proverbs 26:23-26 Smooth words may hide a wicked heart, just as a pretty glaze covers a common clay pot. 24 People with hate in their hearts may sound pleasant enough, but don't believe them. 25 Though they pretend to be kind, their hearts are full of all kinds of evil. 26 While their hatred may be concealed by trickery, it will finally come to light for all to see.

Titus 1:16 Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are despicable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good..

1 John 1:8, 10 If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth... 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.
Study Questions

1. Give a good definition of the word hypocrite.

2. There are three false assumptions which cause people to conclude that hypocrisy invalidates Christianity. Respond to each.
   - All sin is hypocrisy
   - Profession means possession
   - Christians claim to be perfect

3. List a key passage which gives some of Jesus’ feelings and descriptions about hypocrisy.

4. How can Jesus’ view of hypocrisy help turn this objection into an opportunity?

5. If the validity of Christianity is not based on the performance of Christians, what is its basis?

Notes