

An Unregenerate Sheep in the Fold: What to do if You Think a Group Member Isn't Saved

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You're sitting in your living room after small group, reflecting on the conversation of the evening. While you're reviewing the night, you remember something a group member said that catches you off guard:

"I don't know why we put so much emphasis on the Bible... it's just a book."

As you pray over this, you recall other similar comments, and become increasingly concerned that this person may not actually be a Christian.

And, you're right. They may not be.

According to recent Barna studies, only 19% of American born-again Christians hold to a biblical worldview. 79% believe that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches. Slightly less than two-thirds of this same group (62%) believes that Jesus was absolutely sinless, as the Bible teaches. Less than half (47%) believe that salvation is by grace through faith, and not by works.

Given these statistics, I'd cautiously say it's a certainty that there are men and women in small groups who may not be saved, but think they are.

This is a highly contentious statement to make, so I must clarify: We may not use these facts as license to self-righteously determine who is and is not a Christian. We must also be careful not to confuse someone who is immature in his faith with someone who is unregenerate. We must be wise in discerning the difference based on Scripture.

The Immature Believer

An immature believer is one who is simply confused about what the Bible teaches and what it says. He may be a brand-new Christian in need of guidance, or a long-time Christian who simply has not sat under authoritative biblical teaching. He may even be one of those people who constantly fight over secondary issues.

While an immature believer may not understand Scripture well, or have some serious errors in his understanding of God, he is ultimately marked by a teachable spirit. He is open to correction from people who love him. He takes heed to godly counsel. He has a desire to learn and grow into the likeness of Christ.

The Corinthian church is a perfect example of immature believers. They lacked discernment concerning doctrinal issues. They excused gross unrepentant sin. They abused spiritual gifts in worship. Despite all this, they received correction from the Apostle Paul. They were teachable.

The Unregenerate Churchgoer

Here's where things get complicated. The unregenerate churchgoer is very good at hiding

in a crowd. Many of these churchgoers have been going to church for a long time; many more serve in the church, as greeters, in children's ministry, or even leading a small group.

Like an immature believer, these churchgoers are marked by a lack of biblical knowledge or an errant understanding of God. Others are characterized by a dogmatic legalism that elevates morality to the highest form of authority. Some believe that grace frees us to sin unashamedly; after all, God has forgiven us (see Romans 6:15). Some believe that all things are lawful, despite not being beneficial (see 1 Cor. 6:12-13). All will turn away from sound doctrine, and find teachers who will tell them what they want to hear (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4).

They do not heed godly counsel. They do not submit to authority. They don't have a desire to grow into the likeness of Christ. They are not teachable.

These are the clear marks of an unregenerate churchgoer.

You might be thinking, "Does it even matter if I think someone's a Christian or not? What do I do with the person who is already in my group?"

The answer, again, is both simple and complicated.

Does it matter if we think someone may or may not be a Christian and how do we respond?

Our friends' salvation and ongoing relationship with Jesus should be of great concern to us. If we love our friends, we need to do what we can to assist them, whether they are mature believers, immature or secretly unregenerate. The following are a few of the things I've found helpful, as I hope you will:

1. **Keep Christ central in all our content.** Our studies must always be pointing to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Teach the gospel when it's popular and when it's not (which is all the time). Only the gospel has the power to transform the hearts of the mature, immature and unregenerate alike.
2. **Be patient.** Paul exhorted Timothy to teach with complete patience. Not everyone learns at the same rate. Everyone stumbles; everyone gives in to temptation, and should be treated with gentleness.
3. **Confront sin.** We must be willing to call each other to repentance. We must cultivate an atmosphere where it's safe to confess our sins, to be open about our struggles and give and receive appropriate correction. If I am in sin, I expect one of the men in my group to confront me. If we love each other, we can do nothing less.
4. **Hold your ground.** Not everyone will endure sound teaching, but hold fast to it, especially when it's hard.

5. **Be willing to say goodbye.** Sometimes the healthiest thing you can do is to ask someone to leave your group if they are disruptive, unrepentant and unteachable.

Are there unregenerate sheep in the fold? Probably. But this shouldn't come as a surprise to us. So what do we do? We keep Christ the focus of all our studies, we show patience and mercy, we confront sin in love, we hold our ground on key doctrinal issues, and we must be willing to say goodbye to those who will not do the same.

It's intimidating, to be sure; but this is the call of leadership.