

## Bar-Code Faith

Think of the barcodes now used on goods in most stores. The scanner responds only to the bar code. It makes no difference what is in the bottle or package that bears it, or whether there is on the “right” one or not. The calculator responds through its electronic eye to the barcode and totally disregards everything else. If the ice cream sticker is on the dog food, the dog food is ice cream, so far as the scanner knows or cares.

On a recent radio program a prominent minister spent fifteen minutes enforcing the point that “justification”, the forgiveness of sins, involves *no change at all* in the heart or personality of the one forgiven. It is, he insisted, something entirely external to you, located wholly in God himself. His intent was to emphasize the familiar Protestant point that salvation is by God’s grace only and is totally independent of what we may do. But what he in fact said was that *being a Christian has nothing to do with the kind of person you are*. The implications of this teaching are stunning.

The theology of Christian trinkets says there is something about the Christian that works like the barcode. Some ritual, some belief, or some association with a group affects God the way the barcode affects the scanner. Perhaps there has occurred a moment of mental assent to a creed, or an association entered into with a church. God “scans” it, and forgiveness floods forth. An appropriate amount of righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account in the band of heaven, and all our debts are paid. We are, accordingly, “saved”. Our guilt is erased. How could we not be Christian?

For some Christian groups the “account” has to be appropriately serviced to keep the debts paid up, because we really are not perfect. For others—some strongly Calvinist groups—every debt past, present and future is paid for at the initial scan. But the *essential thing* in either case is the forgiveness of sins. And the payoff for having faith and being “scanned” comes at *death* and after. Life *now* being lived has no necessary connection with being a Christian as long as the “barcode” does its job.

We do hear a lot of discussion concerning what *good* Christians do and don’t do. But of course, it is not necessary to be a *good* Christian in order to be forgiven. That’s the main point of the barcode, (and it does a good job).  
-Dallas Willard

1. What are your initial impressions of what Dallas Willard says?
2. Is anything particularly insightful or new? Why?
3. How does this change your perspective on ministry, prayer, and evangelism?
4. Are there any “barcodes” in your faith tradition? Are there “barcodes” in CCC?
5. Why might God want to change a person’s character and spirituality here on earth—before the person reaches heaven?
6. Why does it make sense that in addition to offering people a way to heaven, God would also meet their earthly psychological, social, emotional and global needs?