

“GOD’S IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN”

For all of the times that we hear it used today, you would think that the Bible would be filled with the mention of the name ‘Christian.’ After all, Christianity is based on the teachings of the New Testament. But the name ‘Christian’ is only found in the Bible three times. Now, what a Christian IS is found all throughout the New Testament, but the name itself only occurs three times, and those three times are after the return of Christ to His throne in Heaven, and the establishment of the church. Those three verses that contain the name ‘Christian’ are very interesting. They reveal to us what a Christian is, and who can rightfully be called a Christian.

Before we look at those verses, I want to say that wearing the name ‘Christian’ is a high honor, and no small thing. We cheapen and do a great injustice to the name of Jesus when we ascribe it to anybody or anything that is even remotely religious.

Acts 4:12 “...for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

Jeremiah 34:15-16 “...and ye had made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name: But ye turned and polluted my name...”

Now, God had called His people ‘Israel’ by His own name, and He made it clear that His name is holy and not to be taken in vain, or cheapened, or abused. He made this promise to them:

Isaiah 62:2 “...and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name.”

God says this name would be given after the Gentiles would come to see the glory of God. It would be a name specially designated to them by God. Well, after the conversion of Cornelius, the Italian Gentile (recorded in Acts 10 and 11), the scripture tells us what that name would be:

Acts 11:26 “...And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”

It has been said that that name was given to the disciples in derision by the enemies of Christ, but as we’ll see in a few moments, the name was also ascribed to the church by the Holy Spirit Himself, so this was a name that was chosen and approved by God. It is a wonderful name because it denotes the ownership and lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a special name, not to be taken lightly or carelessly ascribed. My friend, simply having some kind of religious affinity or affiliation doesn’t make a person a Christian. Merely calling oneself by that name does not make him/her a Christian. Being the descendant of someone who is a Christian or living in a country that is dominated by people who think of themselves as Christians, even going to the assembly of the church from time to time—none of these things give one the right to be called a Christian. What I am interested in today is this: what is God’s idea of a Christian?

As I said, there are three occurrences of the name 'Christian' in God's Word. All three are found in the New Testament, and they each tell us something different and unique about the name and what it means to wear it. These three verses give us a complete picture of what God's idea of a Christian is.

Let's look first of all at the very first time the name is used, the first time the Bible mentions it. Up until the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, the primary work of the gospel and of the church had focused on Jerusalem. But, after Stephen was martyred, that changed, and the disciples of Jesus were scattered as far away as the city of Antioch, which was past Samaria, up into Syria, near where Turkey is today.

Acts 11:19 "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice..."

That word "*scattered*" that Luke uses is a Greek word meaning "*sown about or the scattering of seeds.*" Well, that was exactly the effect because these people took the gospel with them and the seed of the kingdom was planted in those far-flung places. In the city of Antioch in particular, the gospel took hold and what a wonderful work took place there!

Acts 11:21 "And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number of people believed, and turned unto the Lord."

In other words, the gospel made a BIG impact on that city, and the church there was a tremendous success. You'll find that it became a beacon of truth and influence among the churches of the first century. Barnabas was sent there to preach and he brought Saul (the Apostle Paul) to Antioch, and the Bible says that they spent a year there, working with that church and preaching the gospel. Then Luke tells us this:

Acts 11:26 "...the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

The word 'Christian' simply means 'a follower of Christ.' I want you to notice that it doesn't say that they were first called Baptists at Antioch, or Methodists or Episcopalians or Presbyterians or Pentecostals or Catholics at Antioch. Those names weren't given by the Lord and they didn't exist in the first century. Rather, the Bible says they were called Christians. You see, there were no denominations to be delineated then. There was just one church, as the Lord intended, united in faith, doctrine and practice. They were called Christians, or followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, there is a reason they were called the followers of Christ. Notice what Luke calls them. He says, "the disciples were called Christians at Antioch." The very fact that they were disciples of Jesus led the people to look at them and call them the followers of Christ. These people were following Jesus and His teachings and His life. They were His disciples.

Now, if the name 'Christian' describes someone who is a disciple of Jesus, then perhaps we need to ask, what does it mean to be a disciple? Are you truly the Lord's disciple? Do you suppose the 2,000,000,000 people on earth who presently call themselves Christians are really disciples of Jesus? After all, what is a disciple? The word means 'to be a follower of and an Adherent to the teachings of another.' It means to accept and assist in the spreading of the message of another. You see, a person is not a Christian in

name only. He doesn't just claim some form of religion and then have the right to put on the title 'Christian.' Rather, the name 'Christian' is to describe what a person IS and what he believes and the kind of life he lives. What did Jesus say about being a disciple?

Luke 14:26-27 "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:33 "So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

You see, being a disciple means a lot more than just claiming the name. It means following, at great cost and great effort. Jesus said the following:

John 15:8 "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples."

What kind of fruit are you bearing? What kind of fruit am I bearing for the Lord Jesus? Do you really have the right to be called His disciple? There is a big difference between knowing about someone and being their student or disciple. For example, you may be a great student of history, and there may be people who made a mark on history, for good or for bad, that you know a lot about. Their lives may be of great interest to you and you may devote a lot of time reading books about them and studying their lives. But that doesn't mean that you're their disciple. Perhaps you could tell me a great deal about Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. But surely that doesn't make you their disciple. You see, to be their disciple, you have to accept and adhere to their teachings, and make them your own beliefs and practices. Well, of course we don't do that, even if we may be interested in them as historical figures. The same thing is true for those who changed history in a good way. Just knowing about Jesus, or empathizing with Jesus, or saying that you love Jesus—those things don't make you Jesus' disciple. Jesus Himself said:

John 14:23 "...if a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him."

So, being a disciple of Jesus means being a follower of Jesus, a student of Jesus' teachings, an imitator of Jesus' life. Now, it also means being a member of His church. I know a lot of people try to tell us that being a Christian and being a member of Christ's church are two different things. But, the Bible doesn't make that separation. In fact, when the disciples were called Christians in Antioch, that is referring to the church that had been planted there. And, how does one become a disciple? That's a good question. And if I can answer that question, then I can, at the same time, learn what I must do to become a Christian. Do you suppose that the Bible tells us *how* those first-century disciples became disciples? Surely it does!

Do you remember when Jesus gave the great commission just before He returned to glory? Well, the New King James version renders the words of Jesus this way:

Matthew 28:19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...”

So, there it is! What happened when the gospel was preached and people decided to become disciples of the Lord Jesus? The disciples who were later called Christians, how did they become disciples? Jesus said for the apostles to go and teach them and baptize them. Now, let's look at what happened when they went out and did what Jesus said for them to do. In Acts 2, Peter was preaching Christ to the Jews on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, and they became convicted of their sins and they believed what Peter was preaching.

Acts 2:37 “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

In other words, they wanted to become disciples of Jesus. Peter was preaching in order to try to make disciples of them. Peter answered their question in the following verse:

Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Acts 2:41 “Then those who gladly received the word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

Added to what?

Acts 2:47 “...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

So, Peter and the others were told to go preach and make disciples. He preached Jesus, he commanded them to be baptized in order to receive the forgiveness of their sins, and the Lord added them to the church when they were saved. Now, friend, that's how they became disciples; disciples, who therefore are Christians. That means that a Christian is a baptized member of Christ's church. He is a daily cross-bearing follower of the Lord Jesus. So, Acts 11:26 tells us a great deal about God's idea of a Christian.

But, then the name 'Christian' appears a second time in scripture. This time, it was spoken by a king, to whom the apostle Paul was preaching; a great ruler by the name of Agrippa. He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, and he was appointed by Rome to serve as ruler in the area around Galilee. Before Paul was taken as prisoner to Rome, he was given the marvelous chance to stand before this great ruler and make his appeal for the gospel. If you read that sermon, it is wonderful. Paul made a fervent and heartfelt appeal to the king about not only who Jesus is, but what Jesus had done for him. I imagine that Agrippa was probably sitting on the edge of his seat as Paul told the story of the Damascus Road, and all that had happened to bring this former arch enemy of Jesus to become His disciple. Paul knew Agrippa, and that Agrippa had heard about the prophets of Israel. As he said, this wasn't done in a corner (Acts

26:26). This great movement that had erupted in Jerusalem a few years before, Agrippa had heard about that. So, Paul looked at Agrippa and asked him:

Acts 26:27 “King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.”

Acts 26:28 “Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.”

Now, most scholars point out that in the original text, what Agrippa was saying was more of a question to Paul. That is, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Or, “Do you think, by your speech, that you’re going to make me a Christian?” Well, Agrippa DID understand something important about becoming a Christian, and that is, that it is a matter of the conscious choice of a person to become or not to become a Christian. Christianity must either be accepted or rejected by each of us. The preaching of the gospel puts that choice before every person who hears it. What that means is, a person is not born a Christian. A person is not a Christian because he is born to parents who are Christians. He’s not a Christian because he was born in America or any other country that is made up predominantly of people who claim the title of Christian. And, friend, a baby cannot be taken and christened or sprinkled in order to make him/her a Christian. There is no such thing as “infant baptism” in the New Testament. In fact, it defies the very purpose and design of baptism! Baptism is a death to sin and burial in water, which is predicated upon one’s faith in Jesus and repentance of sin! Faith and repentance are *choices* on the part of the sinner, who decides he wants to be free from his sin and be saved. Well, babies and young children can’t do that! They can’t consciously and rationally decide to follow Jesus and be His disciple. So, God’s idea of a Christian is someone who decides to follow Jesus and who renders obedience to Him. It is a gross misuse of the name ‘Christian’ to apply it to people who have not been baptized into Christ, and who are not members of Christ’s church, and who are not following Him in daily discipleship.

But then, there is one more time that the Holy Spirit places this name ‘Christian’ in holy writ.

1 Peter 4:15-16 “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”

Peter tells us something important about what it means to be a Christian. The name ‘Christian’ doesn’t come cheaply. It isn’t to be *worn* cheaply, carelessly or flippantly. Rather, it comes at *great cost*. Not only does it require that we figuratively bear our cross in daily living, as Jesus said of the disciple. But, to wear the name ‘Christian’ means that we are willing to suffer for it. Isn’t it interesting that of only three times that the name is used, one of the times tells us that we will suffer as a Christian? That means that being a Christian means more than just going down to the assembly of the church twice a year. It means much more than conveniently identifying as a Christian where it may be socially acceptable. Oh, no, being a Christian is a called out and sanctified life. It is a life that is totally offered in service and sacrifice to the Lord Jesus.

Isaac Watts wrote this great hymn nearly 300 years ago:

Am I a Soldier of the Cross?

Am I a soldier of the cross, a follow'r of the Lamb?

And shall I fear to own his cause, or blush to speak His name?

Must I be carried to the skies on flow'ry beds of ease,

While others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood?

Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord;

I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy Word...

So, friend, are you a Christian? And I mean, are you REALLY a Christian? Have you been baptized into Christ? Are you a member of HIS church, that same church that existed in Antioch a long time ago? Are you a member of the church that we read about established in the New Testament, that believes, preaches, practices and worships according to God's Holy Word? Are you a daily disciple of the Lord Jesus, taking up your cross and following Him in daily living? Are you willing to suffer for His great name? Are you willing to CHOOSE to forsake the things of this world and make Jesus your Lord and your Master and to bow before Him and let Him take your life and make out of it what HE wants to make out of it. Friends, that's what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of a Christian. If you will obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ today and have your sins washed away by Christ's blood in baptism for the remission of your sins, you can become a Christian. The Lord will make you His follower, His disciple, and He'll add you to His church. If you're not truly a Christian, we'd like to help you become one, this very day.