

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

4 What Does it Mean to Be a Christian?

Scripture: Acts 5:14; Luke 14:26; I Thessalonians 1:6; 1 John 3:14

*“And **believers** were the more added to the Lord, multitudes, both men and women.”*

*“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 ye became **followers** of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.”*

*“We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the **brethren**. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.”*

The question before us this morning has the distinction of being both long overdue and at the same time, superfluous or unnecessary. It really all depends upon where a person is in terms of understanding what Scripture has to say about being a Christian. Some people have a very dubious view of the matter while others will doubtless find our study a review of truth learned long ago. Whatever, I believe that somewhere along the line in this series of questions, which won't go away, we should stop to consider what it means to be a Christian according to the New Testament. In my study I have found four terms mentioned in that part of the Bible we call the New Testament which were applied to primitive or early Christians. These terms suggest realms of being in which the individual person becomes Christ's man, woman, boy or girl. I have mentioned these terms and underscored them in the verses of Scripture cited above. They are; **(1) Believer, (2) Disciple, (3) Follower, and (4) Brethren**. The words **“Believer”** and **“Disciple”** have to do with the intellect. The word **“Follower”** has reference to the will, and the word **“Brethren”** deals with the realm of our affections, our heart. In these areas of our experience Jesus Christ becomes decisive. Our response to Jesus in this way causes us to be His person. Our world revolves around Him. Simply stated, a Christian is a person who has committed himself by faith to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and consequently has received the gift of forgiveness and eternal life, in addition to the presence of the Holy

Spirit Who has come to reside within as in a temple. Now let us give greater emphasis to these terms I have mentioned.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN IS CALLED A "BELIEVER:"

Anyone who has been around the four Gospels for any length of time knows the emphasis which is placed upon believing. Again and again Jesus threw out the challenge of believing in Himself. He said those who believe in Him will live, and those who don't will stay dead.

What exactly did Jesus mean when He called for such belief? Obviously He did not mean belief in His physical person for He stood bodily before His listeners who were given the choice of believing in Him. On one occasion Jesus said, *"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth upon him."* (John. 3:36) In recording that teaching of Jesus the Apostle John was carefully guided by the Holy Spirit to chose a word which carried the exact import of what Jesus meant by "belief". The word John used is the Greek word *"pisteuwn"* which denotes active trust and dependence, a sense of reliability. Jesus was asking people to bank their lives and pin their hopes to who He said He was. His kind of belief was knowledge that was to be acted upon, it was much more than credulity, a belief that something is true because of the evidence at hand. The human mind is so constructed that it cannot help but believe evidence which is convincing. A person is little more than a fool not to believe facts which are set before him. There is no spiritual virtue here, the belief Jesus spoke about demanded a response and left no room for a mere scholastic understanding of who He was.

Perhaps this can be illustrated by saying that if Christ were to appear on earth today we can imagine that people would be open to receiving Him in one way or another. Doubtless, however, there would be a difference in the way He would be accepted. In Luke 18:18-19 we have the story of a certain ruler who addressed Jesus with the words, *"Good-Rabbi."* I believe that many in our time would approach Jesus with the same salutation, if not in word, certainly in spirit. There would be other people who would greet Jesus in a much different way. It would be more like the way Thomas spoke to Him with the words, *"My Lord and my God!"* (John 20:28) The point here is that it makes all the difference in the world which of these groups would find us among their number. Jesus is more than *"rabbi,"* He is *"redeemer!"* The young ruler was of irreproachable character, amiable, and candid. Jesus *"beholding him, loved him."* Yet, his

greeting was refused. It betrayed this man had failed to cast himself upon the work and words of Jesus as his very own savior rather than merely the wisest of teachers. Perhaps he used the words in an altruistic sense, meaning to say "you are the most devoted of men." He may have meant them as an ethical compliment suggesting, "you are the best of men." Whatever the case may be, the greeting "*Good Master*" serve to express what we may understand to be his attitude toward Christ. His story concludes with what Dante called the young man's "great refusal" brought to mind in the words, "*He went away sorrowful.*"

The words of John 3:36 may be read in this way, "*He that relieth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that relieth not on the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth upon him.*" The young ruler never brought himself to that place of reliance on Jesus, though he must have believed a great deal about Jesus in an intellectual way. What a vast difference there is in knowing something about a person and in depending upon that person. The Book of Acts tells us that "*believers were the more added to the Lord...*" The old proverb is correct, "You are what you believe." You are a Christian if you believe; that is if you believe in the way Jesus called for belief in Himself.

Before I conclude this point let me say for your further study that there are three people mentioned in the Bible whose faith God commented upon. These people were Abel (Hebrews 11:4), Enoch (Hebrews 11:5) and the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:10). The story of these three men is a thrilling one and illustrates very clearly that their belief did not leave them sitting and thinking only, it caused them to act upon what they felt was true. Their faith pleased God.

The verse we have been looking at up to this point which has given us a term applied to early Christians is Acts 5:14. The New American Standard Bible renders it, "*And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.*" The writer of this fact used the word "*Lord*" to describe what these people believed about Jesus. The word "*Lord*" is a big strong word. It implies power, mastery, and authority vested in someone. The Jew called Jehovah God "*Lord.*" The Roman citizen called the emperor "*Lord.*" The Greek slave spoke of his master as "*Lord.*" This was common knowledge in these early days. Therefore, when a person believed in Jesus as "*Lord*" it was much the same as coming to honor the power which Jehovah had over the Jew, the emperor held over the citizen, and the master over the slave. This thought leads us to the second and third terms applied to Christians in the New Testament, the words disciple and follower.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN IS CALLED A "DISCIPLE:"

The verse mentioned early in our study, Luke 14:26, appears to need some explanation as far as many people are concerned. Jesus is not asking anyone to hate his mother and father as we understand the word hate. Luke recorded the Lord's thought with the Greek word *"miseo"* which means to "love less." Jesus taught, *"If anyone comes to me and loves not his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his life, less than He loves me, he cannot be my disciple."* The word *"disciple"* comes to us in the text as *"mathetes"* having the technical meaning of one who receives instruction, regardless of age.

A disciple is a pupil who is much more than a spectator-listener who allows the teaching to go in one ear and out the other. It has been said that no respectable teaching rabbi would tolerate such a pupil. If you were the disciple of a particular teacher in the days Jesus walked on earth, you not only received instruction, but were willing to bring your life into conformity with that instruction. We are familiar with the Lord's statement, *"...learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls."* The only possible way Jesus could have made such a promise was that His teaching would be taken seriously. Yes, in the New Testament Christians are called "disciples." They are students taught and trained by the Master. They are people who have come to Jesus caught up in superstition and ignorance only to find truth, correction and direction for their lives. There are so many things to be learned from Jesus as well as from the writing Apostles who enlarged upon the truth laid down by the Savior. We must be continually asking ourselves who it is that provides ultimate truth for our lives, if we are a people who do bring our decisions to the court of His judgment? As a young person seeking guidance concerning our lifework, as a husband and wife considering their future, as business people who face decisions, as to the spending of our money and our time, our efforts, do we submit these to the wisdom of Jesus? Disciples are people who huddle with their Lord, allowing Him to call the signals and being willing to run His play. Jesus asked a most penetrating question in the words; "Why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46, KJV) Do what Jesus says? How can we? There is only one way. Pay attention to what He has said. Disciples are people who are not indifferent to what He has said, they care. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means to be a disciple, one who seeks to know and understand the mind of the Lord.

III. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN IS A "FOLLOWER:"

Remember the game, "Follow the Leader?" The rules required doing exactly what the leader did. If he put his hand on top of his head, you did the same. If he jumped on one leg, you somehow managed the same. All kinds of things, sometimes you even did things you didn't believe you could do, but you followed the leader! Early Christians were called followers of the Lord. Paul wrote about this in I Thessalonians 1:6. He is very discerning to note how people who hear the gospel immediately begin to imitate and follow those who declare the gospel. Mindful of this we must realize that we do not live unto ourselves. People are often established in the faith because of what they see in the lives of older or mature Christians. However, any believer who centers his life upon another Christian has built upon a false foundation. Eyes must always be lifted above people and fastened upon the Lord Himself. A great problem with Christianity is that there are too many "followers" who are not following all that close to their Lord. The word translated "*follow*" occurs ninety times in the New Testament and is used for everything from a casual direction to a clarion call toward a lifetime of service. Jesus used the words many times. His call was not in a special tone of voice or in special, churchy vocabulary. He simply said, "*Follow Me*" (Matthew 9:9; 37-38; John 21:20-22; 8:12; 12:26) There is no joy, peace or victory in the Christian life without a following. Disciples have learned what it is that Jesus wants them to do, followers do it. It is, of course, unnatural to make such a shift in the center of your being so that you follow the dictates of another rather than your own impulses. But that is something Christians have decided to do. The chorus expresses it so well: "I have decided to follow Jesus; No turning back, no turning back. Though none go with me, still I will follow; No turning back, no turning back." Such a commitment is beyond us in our own strength, but the Lord is there to help. He does not mock us when He cries, "*Follow Me.*"

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN IS CALLED A "BROTHER:"

Some people wince when it comes to this "brother" and "sister" business, but Christians are, according to Scripture, people who have come to a unique relationship with one another. Interestingly enough it is entrance upon a family lifestyle and brings together people related by blood. Oh not the kind that runs through their veins, but the kind that dripped at Calvary centuries ago. That blood binds them together as sons of God and brothers one of another. Jesus made it very clear that "*whoever shall do the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.*" (Matthew 12:50) This kind of relationship

we have with Him as Elder Brother draws all Christians into a brotherhood. This meant a great deal to the first Christians, so much so that if it was found they did not love one another, indications were they did not know the Lord. (1 John.3:14) Humanly speaking, the first Christian Church could not have held together had it not been for the wonderful spirit of brotherhood which prevailed everywhere. They needed one another and thus united they were able to stand in a world that was extremely hostile toward them. It was not difficult for them to have all things common as they did. They defended the family name and reputation. They helped one another and shared. It was the natural thing for them to do, related as they were to one another, in Christ.

To be a Christian means to be a believer, a disciple, a follower, and a brother. The New Testament Christians were called these four things. Are you a Christian, am I? It should not be that difficult to tell. Should there be someone who does not know for sure, may you this day believe, learn, follow and come to love your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

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