

The Challenge of the New Christianity

The word "Christian" occurs only three times in the Bible. More often, the word "disciple" is used. These two words are almost interchangeable, for they both refer to a person who, having accepted the teachings of Jesus, has become one of his followers.

The challenge is this:

1. **Read through the book of Matthew, and pay special attention to the way *Jesus* defines a disciple (= a Christian).** This would include both what the disciple *does*, as well as what he *believes* about life and reality - his actions and his perspective. Look for things that do not necessarily fit the definition of "Christian" that you are familiar with (or that you have heard others give). You may wish to write these views down, before you start.

Be careful that you focus on Jesus' definition *the way he says it*. This is important, because the more a person has been exposed to other people's definitions of "Christian," the easier it will be for him to automatically "reinterpret" what Jesus says, so that it becomes similar to those other definitions.

As you read what Jesus has to say, consider the differences between Jesus' definition of what it means to "follow Jesus," and any other definitions you may have heard in the past. (You may wish to write down these differences as you find them, and consider them as a group, after you have completed your study.) Consider also the fact that, if you want to know *Jesus'* definition of what it means to be a disciple (a follower of Jesus), *what he says about his own views has more authority (in defining his views) than what other people may say about them*.

2. **Once you are familiar with *Jesus* definition of what it means to be a disciple (= a Christian), you must choose one of the following options:**
 - You may choose to reject Jesus' definition of "Christian," *as well as* any other definition that people have invented. In other words, you may decide that you simply do *not* want to be a Christian. If this is the case, then you have made your choice with a clear understanding of what you were rejecting. As for Jesus' definition, you will be able to say that your rejection of it wasn't based on misinformation given to you by some preacher or other modern religious figure; you rejected it knowing full well what you were doing.
 - You may choose to ignore Jesus' definition, and go after one of the hundreds of other definitions that have been invented down through the ages. You could even invent your own definition, if desired. You can pick one that lets you feel comfortable, or one that smooths-over any of the difficult or objectionable parts of Jesus' definition. You can pick one that lets you do the things you like to do (even sin), yet which says that you will still get to heaven in the future (or whatever other "reward" your definition might offer).
 - You may choose to accept Jesus' definition. This may be the *least* comfortable of these three choices, for it will require major changes in both lifestyle and perspective. In fact, you will discover that Jesus requires things you are *unable* to do - *yet he still says you must do them*. You will need to throw yourself at Jesus' feet (an expression of prayer and humility), and beg him for mercy, and for the power to live the life of a disciple. (You will *never* succeed in accepting this third choice in your own strength.)

If you choose this third option, you will discover the "New Christianity." You will also discover that, though it may be *new* to you, it is actually the *original* Christianity - the one that Jesus taught his disciples.

A word of caution:

If you take this challenge, you will discover verses that most people find difficult to accept. Some of these verses, if taken out of context, could even result in false conclusions. Before you reach your conclusions, you need to read *the entire account* and find out *the rest of what* Jesus says, in order to get the full picture of what a disciple (a Christian) is.

Here is an extreme example of this: In one passage, Jesus tells us that, if our hands or eyes are the cause of our sin, it would be better to cut them off, than to go to hell (Matthew 18:8-9). Many religious people will tell you that Jesus was exaggerating - that he didn't really mean it. So the first issue is this: When Jesus said these things, did *he* say he was exaggerating or that he didn't mean what he said? (Or is it just the religious people, who are making that claim?)

The second issue, if you conclude that Jesus *did* mean what he said, is this: Before you go out and get a hatchet or a sharp knife, you need to do two things: First, pay attention to the word "*if*," which occurs in this passage. Second, consider the rest of what Jesus says. If you read the *whole* account, you will discover that the issue isn't so easy, that by simply cutting off a body part, all your struggles with sin would be over. Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that the problem of sin goes *much deeper* - that it originates in the *heart* (Matthew 15:19). Getting rid of it takes *more than* a hatchet or a sharp knife: *It requires a heart surgery that only Jesus can perform*.