

The Bible's Definition of "Christian"

(The Christian and Discipleship)

There is a view prevalent today that claims a person can be a *Christian* without being a *disciple* of Jesus Christ, that he can accept Jesus as *Savior* without accepting him as *Lord* (a word which means *Master*). Yet this view is *not* compatible with the way the Bible uses the word "Christian." The word "Christian" occurs only three times, and when we examine the passages in which it occurs, we discover that, in each instance, it is compatible (or even synonymous) with the word "disciple." In one instance, it is directly connected with that word.

In the days of the apostles, the word "Christian" was a term of derision that was used by their enemies. Instead of being a compliment - or even a status symbol (as it sometimes is, today) - it was an insult. A person who became a follower (disciple) of Jesus experienced a radical change in values, attitudes and actions - and the world mocked such people by calling them "Christians."

As we examine these three New Testament passages which use the word "Christian," we will discover - perhaps with great sadness - that most people who claim to be "Christian" don't have the characteristics which the Bible associates with that word. And so, this leaves us with three choices:

- 1) Accept the New Testament concept of "Christian" - which means that most people today who claim to be Christians *aren't*.
- 2) Accept the modern definition of that word - which means denying the New Testament's concept and reducing the word to something that is almost meaningless.
- 3) Close our eyes and ignore the issue - which means almost the same as accepting the second choice.

Regardless of how we might choose, it still stands true that, in the days of the apostles:

- 1) *Only* a person who was willing to accept Jesus as "*Lord*" ("Master") would be willing to be the *type of person* described as a "Christian" in these passages.
- 2) *Only* a person who was willing to accept the *necessary* life changes (involving both attitudes and actions) would be labeled a "Christian" by the unsaved people around them. (After all, why would unsaved people mock such a person, by calling him a "Christian," if he was no different from them? What reason would they have, to claim that he was imitating Christ, if he wasn't following the ways of Christ?)
- 3) *Only* a person who was willing to be like Jesus, *even when it meant suffering for him*, would be called a "Christian" - and his willingness to be like Jesus would often be the reason the world would try to make him suffer!

These are the marks of a disciple - a follower of Jesus, in the true (New Testament) sense of the word!

When we consider how often the word "Christian" is greatly abused and mis-represented today, we could find ourselves wondering if this was one of the reasons that God rarely included this word in the Bible! Normally, the Bible uses other words to describe the followers of Jesus - words such as "disciple," "brother" (or "sister"), "holy one" ("saint," in some translations), "the elect," "the faithful," or "believers" (that is, people who put their trust in Jesus). We also find terms such as, "the church of God" (referring to people who are "united with Christ," rather than to a religious institution), "servants (or slaves) of God," and "those who call on the name of the Lord." When we correctly understand the New Testament definitions of these terms, we discover that they, too, have little in common with many of the people who call themselves "Christian" today.

Acts 11:22,23,26: The Word "Christian" is associated with...

- **A Visible Evidence of God's Grace (God's undeserved kindness - "grace" - had a visible effect on the people)**
- **Being a Disciple of Christ**

Act 11:22-23, 26 ... the church at Jerusalem ... sent Barnabas as far as Antioch. When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad. He explained to them the need for a wholehearted commitment to the Lord. ... The disciples were first called "Christians" at Antioch.

There was a visible change in the people's lives - something that was proof that God's grace was present, and something that Barnabas could *see*. (Contrast this with people today, who claim to be "Christian," but whose lives remain unchanged.) This passage specifically states that it was the *disciples* who were called "Christians." They were being *mocked* (by those who opposed them) because of the *changes* (the effects of God's grace) which had occurred in their lives. (To better understand what these changes were, we can look throughout the New Testament and see what it says about being a *disciple*.)

Acts 26:20, 22-23,27-28: The Word "Christian" is associated with...

- **A Change in Lifestyle (demonstrated by one's actions)**
- **Accepting the Message of the Prophets**

Act 26:20, 22-23, 27-28 [Paul:] "I went about, first to those in Damascus and Jerusalem, and through all the country of Judea, and then to the Gentiles. I proclaimed that they must change the way they think and act, so that, having turned to God, their deeds might show the fruits of a changed heart. ... And so, by God's help, I am here today, witnessing to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come about: that the Messiah would suffer, and being the first to come back from the dead, would give light both to the Jews and to the Gentiles. ... King Agrippa, do you believe what the prophets have said? I'm sure you do." Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think you can quickly persuade me to become a Christian?"

Here, it was King Agrippa, not Paul, who used the word "Christian." The king was using this word as a term of contempt or ridicule - and his comments need to be understood in the light of that fact. He was not claiming that he was almost ready to become one, for to him, the word "Christian" would have had a connotation similar to what the term "weird religious fanatic" might have today! It would have been "political suicide" for him to "convert" over to the view that some obscure, dead, Jewish criminal named Jesus had come back to life! (Compare with Acts 25:19.)

In this passage, Paul made comments about the need for people to change their ways, and said that the Messiah (Jesus) fulfilled the message of the prophets. To the king, accepting these things (believing and living by them) *meant* becoming a "Christian" (with all the negative connotations that the word had) - and he was unwilling to do this.

1 Peter 1:6-9;4:12-19: The Word "Christian" is associated with...

- **A Willingness to Share in Christ's Sufferings**
- **A Willingness to Continue in Doing the Good Things Which Caused That Suffering**

1 Peter 1:6-9 You have reason for great joy [because of God's protection until the coming day of salvation], though it may be necessary for you to experience trials for a little while. Your faith has much greater value than gold - which, though made pure by fire, has no lasting value. You are being tested in all sorts of ways, so that your faith may be made pure and may result in praise and glory and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, your trust in him gives you a glorious joy which is greater than words can express, for you are receiving the true goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 4:12-19 Dear friends, do not be surprised, as though it were something strange, that your faith is being tested as by fire. Instead, be glad that you are sharing in Christ's sufferings; so that when his glory is revealed, you may be filled with great joy. If people say evil things about you because of the name of Christ, you are blessed; for the Spirit of glory, God's Spirit, is resting upon you! None of you should provide a good reason for punishment, such as being a murderer, or a thief, or an evildoer, or as being someone who interferes in other people's matters. But if a person gets punished because he is a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should praise God that he has been judged worthy to bear that name. For the time has come for refining judgment to begin, starting with the family of God. But if it starts with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not accept God's good news? If the road to salvation is difficult for a righteous person, what chance does the godless sinner have? And so, those who suffer, because it is God's will for them to do so, should commit themselves to the one who made them - the one who can be trusted - and keep on doing what is good.

In the verses given above, 1 Peter 1:6-9 is included, because the passage explains the purpose of trials. 1 Peter 4:12-19 shows us that genuine disciples may experience trials - and if they do so, they should interpret them as being the "will of God" (see 4:19).

Salvation has past, present and future aspects - *all* of which occur in the life of a person who is truly saved. Here, Peter focuses on the *future* aspect of salvation, and how it is accomplished. A purification of our faith is *necessary* for us to receive the "goal of our faith." All who are truly saved (*past* tense, referring to what Jesus accomplished for us) will be purified by God (a present tense action), so that their salvation (*future* tense) will be accomplished. These verses show us that this purification may require suffering or trials of some sort.

A non-disciple may *claim* to be "saved," even though he lives a life that contradicts his claim. If he sees no need to *live* for Jesus (that is, to be a disciple), he might not have to endure the suffering that is caused by those who oppose Jesus. In contrast, a genuine disciple will accept the fact that salvation and living for Jesus are *inseparable*, like two sides of one coin. He will acknowledge that genuine disciples *are* recognized by their "fruit" (actions, etc.) - and that those who hate Jesus will recognize the disciple's "fruit" and will hate them, just like they hate Jesus. (Compare to John 15:18-19+.) It has *always* been this way - compare to Matthew 5:10-12, which refers to opposition even *before* Jesus died on the cross!

The non-disciples, who claim to be saved, yet see no reason to change, do not have the fruit of salvation, because they were never really saved in the first place. It was only a "skin-deep" religious experience, not a change of heart. The world won't hate such people in quite the same way. (They may hate them, but it would be for different reasons.)

In 1 Peter 4:16, Peter uses the word "Christian" within this context of suffering. God uses trials to cause our faith to "grow up" - and so trials can normally be *expected* by those who belong to Jesus. (The trials prove whether or not our faith is truly genuine!) It should not surprise us, says Peter, when we must "suffer as a Christian." In this passage, Peter quotes the Old Testament, to confirm that difficulties are a normal part of being righteous - and that we should entrust ourselves to God (who is our future judge) and continue in doing what is good.

All people will be judged. We (the genuine disciples) are experiencing a purifying judgment even *now* - a *saving* judgment which is described as sometimes difficult or hard (4:18). But the apostle compares our "judgment" with what the unsaved will receive, and tells us that it will be *much worse* for them. God will use *our* trials to purify our faith, and to get us to the goal of eternal salvation. In contrast, those who reject God's good news about salvation have no such assurance. The godless sinner has *no* chance of surviving his judgment, for he has rejected the only one who can cause good to come out of it.

In the end, we, the disciples (followers) of Jesus, will be like the gold that has been made pure by the fire. But those who do not follow Jesus will be like the dross - an impurity which is *unable* to be refined.

Conclusion

Originally, the word "Christian" was a term of derision that enemies of Jesus labeled his followers. It was intended as an insult or mockery. When the followers of Jesus were called "Christians" at Antioch, or when Paul was called a "Christian" by King Agrippa, it was not intended as a compliment! This is the reason that Peter associates the name "Christian" with suffering. A person had to be seriously willing to follow Jesus as a disciple (someone who accepts Jesus' teachings and follows his example), before he would be willing to be called a "Christian"!

Knowing these things, we must make a decision. Unless we're simply going to *ignore* the issue, we must decide whose definition of "Christian" we are going to accept. We can choose the modern (often "politically correct") concept, which will include just about anyone who wants to be called a "Christian" - regardless of what they believe or do. Or we can choose the New Testament concept which equates "Christian" with:

- 1) being a follower (disciple) of Jesus,
- 2) having a changed way of thinking and living,
- 3) having a willingness to accept what the Bible says, and
- 4) having with a willingness to suffer for Christ (along with an avoidance of sinful conduct which would result in *deserved* suffering).

If we accept the New Testament definition, we may discover that, not only will we have to revise our views about who is and who isn't "Christian," but we may need to make some changes in *our own* lives, before we can *rightfully* claim that name. We will also discover that any suffering we may experience, because of those changes, will be worth the trouble - when we consider the wonderful outcome that God has in store for us!