

Who is a Christian?

By David Lasseter

In this study we will evaluate one of the most commonly used words in the religious world today: Christian. We hear on the news that a form of this word (Christianity) refers to one of the "three great religions of the world." However, when we consider the different groups that make up this composite religion many have little or nothing in common. One says she is a member of denomination x and also a Christian. Another says he is a member of denomination y and a Christian. Did the New Testament intend for us to use the word in such a fashion, or is the word misused by people today? Let's turn to the scriptures and see how the word "Christian" was originally used.

DEFINITIONS

1. Christian: Translated from the Greek word *Christianos*, meaning a follower of Christ.
2. Follower: From the Greek word *mimetes*, referring to an imitator.
3. Disciple: From the Greek *Mathetes*, defined as a pupil or a learner.

CHARACTERISTICS WE WILL STUDY

Here I provide a list of the characteristics of a disciple of Christ we will study in detail below.

1. The disciple of Christ is not above his master.
2. The disciple of Christ continues in the word of Jesus.
3. The disciple of Christ recognizes nothing as being greater than Jesus.
4. The disciple of Christ bears much fruit for

Jesus.

5. The disciple of Christ is known by all men by the love he shows.

SCRIPTURES

1. Acts 11:26: Who were called Christians first in Antioch.
2. Acts 26:28,29: King Agrippa's statement after hearing the preaching of Paul.
3. Matthew 10:24,25: The disciple is not above his master.
4. Luke 14:26-33: Jesus tells us who cannot be His disciple.
5. John 8:31,32: Jesus tells us who indeed is His disciple.
6. John 9:26-28: Some were the disciples of another man.
7. John 13:35: How all men will know Jesus' disciple.
8. John 15:8: Another characteristic of Jesus' disciple.
9. Matthew 16:24-26: What a follower of Jesus must do.
10. Matthew 19:16-22: An example of one who was unwilling to follow Jesus.
11. Luke 17:22-24: Jesus warns his disciples not to follow false teachers.
12. John 10:4,5: What Jesus' sheep follow.
13. John 10:27-29: Jesus knows His sheep; the reward they will receive.
14. John 12:26: If any man serves Jesus, he will follow Him.
15. Matthew 10:37: Who is not worthy of Jesus.

Let's begin our study in Acts 11. In verse 26, we read that a specific group of people was first called "Christians" in the city of

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Antioch. Luke tells us the *disciples* were called Christians first in Antioch. Therefore, in order to understand who may correctly be called a Christian, we must understand who may correctly be called a disciple of Christ. Let's look at this idea of being a disciple in greater detail. To understand discipleship we must look to the scriptures and find the characteristics which define a disciple. When we do so, we will discover the characteristics which define a Christian.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISCIPLE OF CHRIST

1. We read in Matthew 10:24 and 25 that the disciple is **not above his master**. Jesus was giving His apostles their instructions before sending them forth (Matthew 10:5). He warns them in verses 22-25 that they will be hated, persecuted, and ridiculed (they called Jesus Beelzebub, why wouldn't they call His servants the same?). They should expect this, since their master was treated so.

2. The disciple of Christ will **continue in His word**. John reveals Jesus' words to this effect in John 8:31,32. He tells a specific group of Jews, those who believed on him, that they are His disciples indeed if they continue in His word. Verse 32 reveals the power present in the word of Jesus: He tells them the truth shall make them free. But what does it mean to "continue", and to what was Jesus referring when He speaks of His word? If one refers to a Greek concordance one will find that 13 different Greek words are translated "continue" in the KJV. Merriam-Webster tells us that continue refers to a process going on without ending. The word Jesus uses for continue here is *meno*. In the New Testament *meno* is translated into English using words other than continue. Let's look briefly at the other words used to define *meno*:

- a. Dwelleth: In John 6:56 Jesus tells us that "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him."
- b. Abide: In Jesus' powerful lesson of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-6), *meno* is translated "abide".
- c. Tarry: Jesus asks Peter, James and John to "tarry ye here, and watch with me" in Matthew 26:38.
- d. Remain: Jesus advised the 70 to "remain" in a house willing to accept them as they journeyed from city to city (Luke 10:7).
- e. Endureth: Jesus tells us to labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life (John 6:27).
- f. Present: In John 14:25 Jesus reminds them of the things spoken while He was yet present with the apostles.
- g. Stand: The word is used in Romans 9:11 as Paul emphasizes the unmovable nature of God's purpose as he reminds them of the fact that Esau (the elder brother) served Jacob.

It is beyond the scope of this study to fully evaluate the various meanings of the word *meno*. I encourage you to delve more deeply into the meaning of this word through the use of a concordance and the New Testament. *Meno* is a powerful word in all its various definitions. Understanding the meaning of *meno* and applying it to the context of the scripture in which is written will give you a deeper understanding of the scriptures using this word.

For our study of discipleship let's return to John 8:31. Jesus tells the Jews who believed on Him that they would be His disciples indeed if they *remain without ending* (continue) in His word. Would they be His disciples if they never started in His word? No. How could they remain in something they never entered. Would they be His disci-

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ples if they started in His word, but strayed from it at some point in time? No. They must remain in His word without end in order to be His disciples.

As we've seen, Jesus tells them they must continue in something very specific: His word. Since we know that the disciples are the ones who were called Christians, then Christians must be those who continue in the word of Jesus. We must understand what Jesus means by His "word" before we can understand who His disciples are.

Let's return to John 8:31. Jesus uses a very personal expression to define what His disciples will hear: He said that "If ye continue in *my* word, then are ye my disciples indeed." The fact He used the personal pronoun "my" indicates the existence of other "words" to which man could cling. But if they did so they would be excluded from the body of men considered by Jesus to be His disciples. But again, what is meant by His "word."

The Greek word used for "word" in John 8:31 is *logos*. From the context of John 8:31 we see that Jesus refers to his doctrine (teaching) when he tells those who believed on Him to continue in His word. Look at verse 32. Jesus continues His thought by telling them that they "shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." What is truth? The scriptures answer the question for us in John 17:17. In Jesus prayer shortly before His crucifixion he asks the Father to "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." Here we see that the word of God is truth, and that Jesus tells those who believe on Him to continue in His word and the truth shall make them free. So what was the word spoken by Jesus? Truth. What is truth? The word of God. So what was the word of Jesus? The word spoken by God. Let's review this again:

a. If ye continue in My word, then are ye my

disciples indeed (John 8:31).

- b. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:32).
- c. Sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth (John 17:17).
- d. Summary: Jesus' word is truth (John 8:31 and 32), the Father's word is truth (John 17:17), therefore Jesus' word is the Father's word.

What scriptures do we have to support this conclusion? Let's consider the following verses:

- a. John 7:16: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me."
- b. John 8:28: "but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things."
- c. John 12:49: "For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak."
- d. John 14:10: "the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself; but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works."
- e. John 5:19: The Son does nothing of Himself, but whatsoever He sees the Father do.
- f. John 6:38: Jesus came down from heaven to do the will of the one who sent Him.
- g. John 14:24: The words spoken by Jesus were not His own.

We see in these 7 verses that Jesus didn't speak on His own authority, but the words he uttered were given Him by the Father. So when Jesus tells those who believe on Him to continue in His word, He was telling them to continue in the word of God. Those who are His "disciples indeed" remain without ending in the word of God.

Let's consider again Jesus' use of the pronoun *my* in verse 31. As mentioned above, those who continue in doctrines (teachings) other than those of Jesus are ex-

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cluded from the body of believers called disciples. Since these individuals are not His disciples, are they Christians? No! Only the disciples were called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). From these verses we can see the critical importance of continuing in the word of Jesus only in order to be true Christians. But how does one know they are continuing in the word of Jesus?

Let's examine this exceedingly important question. Please turn to John 9:28. Jesus had just healed a man blind from birth (John 9:1-38 reveals the entire account). The Pharisees refused to believe the man's explanation for his recovery of sight. After their second request for the man to tell them how his eyes were opened, he responded "I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? Will ye also be His disciples (verse 27)." Notice their reply (verse 28): "Thou are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples." By their own admission they claimed to be disciples of a man, and not of Jesus. What made them disciples of Moses? Their continuance in the teachings of Moses (at least as they claimed to understand them). Jesus shows us elsewhere how they actually failed to follow Moses' teachings (John 5:45-47). But for the purposes of this study, notice how their dependence upon the teachings of a man eliminated them as disciples of Jesus. Does Jesus warn us today about following the teachings of man? He most certainly does! Consider His words in Matthew 15:9. We've seen elsewhere in our studies how it is possible for men to worship Jesus in vain. How do they do so? By teaching for doctrine the commandments of men! Does God wish for men to worship Him properly? Most certainly so! We read in John 4:23 and 24 that God seeketh men to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Now let's put these two thoughts together. First, Jesus warns that we may worship Him in vain by teaching for doctrine the commandments of

men. Next we learn that God desires men to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Is it possible for men to know how to properly worship God? Absolutely! It *must* be possible, or Jesus would have no right to condemn men for worshipping God improperly! It *must* be possible, or Jesus would have no right telling men that we are to worship God in spirit and in truth!

If we are to worship God in spirit and in truth, we must ask ourselves "What is truth." Does that question sound familiar? It should--we asked and answered it earlier in our study. Recall Jesus' words in John 17:17. He tells us what is truth--the word of God! Are commandments of men taught as doctrine part of the truth? No! Consider Jesus instructions to His disciples in Matthew 16:6-12. He warns them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (verse 6). Eventually the disciples understood the meaning of Jesus' words--He was warning them to beware of the doctrine (teaching) of the Pharisees and Sadducees (verse 12). If their teaching was truth, why would He warn them against it? He wouldn't have! If their teachings were not truth, what were they? Lies! Consider John's writing in 1 John 2:21. He reveals to us that "no lie is of the truth." Therefore, what are the commandments of men (if different from those of God) when taught for religious doctrine? Lies!! Who is the father of lies? The devil! (John 8:44) Who is the father of the commandments of men taught as religious doctrine? The devil! Can one worship God in spirit and in truth while adhering to doctrine born of Satan? Is this serious stuff? You'd better believe it!! Can you see why so many are going to be surprised at the day of judgment? Jesus plainly teaches us in Matthew 7:21-27 that it is not enough to say unto Him "Lord, Lord." Those who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who do the will of the Father! Is it the will of the Father that we wor-

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ship Him in vain? No! His will is for men to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Since we cannot worship Him in spirit and in truth while teaching for doctrine the commandments of men, what will those who do so hear at the day of judgment? "I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." (Matthew 7:23) Man CANNOT worship God anyway he desires! He can only worship God in the manner authorized by God! Any teaching of man that differs from the word of God, no matter how insignificant it may seem, if taught as religious doctrine renders his worship VAIN! Please take these words, internalize them in your mind, consider their truth, and critically evaluate your worship practices. Can each and every item of your worship be authorized through the scriptures? Do you have to look to a creed book or other man-made work to find "authority" for your practices? Is your worship practice determined by a council of men or women which meet periodically to evaluate the doctrinal stance of your religious organization? Is a work you use as scriptural authority anything other than the Bible? We read in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 that all scripture is given by the inspiration of God that the man of God may be perfect (complete), throughly furnished unto all good works. Where does a man-made document fit here? It doesn't! No other "revelations" from heaven or otherwise are necessary or authorized if the words penned by Paul in these two verses are true. The scriptures as written nearly 2000 years ago are all one needs to be complete. It is unnecessary for anything to be added to what we have in the Bible (how can one become "more complete"? If one is complete, nothing else is needed.)

So we see from our study to this point that one must continue in the word of Jesus to be His disciple indeed. Anything added to this word makes one a disciple of man. By being a disciple of man, one cannot truly be

called a Christian. Therefore, untold millions of people claim to be "Christians" but in truth are not! Where do you stand?

3. The disciple of Christ **recognizes nothing as being greater than or of more importance than Christ**. Notice Jesus' words recorded by Luke in the 14th chapter, verses 26 and 27 of his gospel. Jesus tells us that those who come to Him and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters and even his own life cannot be Jesus' disciple! His disciple also must bear his cross and come after Him (verse 27)! He continues this thought in verse 33 when He tells us that we cannot be His disciple without forsaking all we have! What does Jesus exclude in these 3 verses? Nothing! Everything mankind considers important is covered in these few sentences. Man cannot love his family members more than Jesus and be His disciple. Man cannot place his possessions above Jesus and be His disciple. Man cannot place satisfaction of physical desires above Christ and be His disciple. Man cannot place his religious tradition above the commandments of Jesus. Man cannot even consider his own life as more important than Jesus and be His disciple. So, one who is truly a Christian has nothing in his/her life above Christ. If nothing in one's life is above Christ, whose word will be heard? Only the words of Jesus! One CANNOT claim to have Jesus first in one's life and follow the teachings of men taught as religious doctrine (see above). If one places the words of a man above those of Jesus, they are placing the man above Jesus. This person is not His disciple and has no proper claim to the name "Christian." If one refuses to deny oneself the sinful pleasures of the flesh, one cannot claim to be a disciple of Christ. They are placing their inner desires (self) above Jesus. Remember our discussion of the cross in an earlier study? What was the purpose of the cross? Torture and death! When Jesus

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tells us His disciple will take up his cross and follow Him He is saying that the disciple will nail to the cross until dead his own selfish desires. This doesn't refer to various trials and tribulations borne without complaint by those who claim to be His disciple (as many people mistakenly teach).

4. The disciple of Christ **bears much fruit for Him**. Let's turn to Jesus' teaching of the vine and the branches, recorded in John 15:1-8. In this parable we see one vine but many branches. The branches are of two types: Fruitful and unfruitful. Jesus clearly shows us the possibility of falling away (falling from grace) in this parable. Consider the unfruitful branches. Were they at one time a part of the vine? Yes! Did they *remain* a part of the vine despite their lack of fruit? No! They were taken away, became withered, and cast into the fire (verse 6). But how do we produce fruit? Can we do so of ourselves? No! Only if we abide (there's that Greek word *meno* again) in Jesus can we bear fruit (verse 5). We can do nothing of ourselves. Can one who loves family, earthly possessions, religious traditions, or his own life more than Jesus bear fruit for Him? No. The branches of a vine are completely dependent upon the vine. They can do nothing of themselves. Should they try to do so, they are no longer part of the vine. Let's consider verse 8. Jesus tells us who is His disciple and who is not. Those who bear much fruit shall be His disciples. What is necessary in order to bear fruit? We must abide in Jesus (verse 5). What is necessary for one to abide in Jesus? He must keep His commandments (1 John 3:24--the Greek word translated dwelleth in verse 24 is *meno*). What fruit will we bear? The same fruit borne by Jesus (as the branches of a grape vine bear grapes, the branches of the spiritual vine (Christ) will bear spiritual fruit identical to the vine). Who is his disciple? The one who bears fruit.

How is one His disciple indeed? By continuing in the word of Jesus (John 8:31).

I do believe we've come full circle. The one who continues in the word of Jesus keeps His commandments. By keeping His commandments, we dwell in Him and He in us. By dwelling in Him we are part of the vine and able to bear much fruit for Him. The one who bears much fruit is a disciple of Jesus. The disciple of Jesus who is one indeed continues in His word. What happens when one continues in the commandments of men? One is no longer continuing in the word of Jesus, is no longer dwelling in Jesus or Jesus in him, is not a part of the vine, cannot bear good fruit for Jesus, is not His disciple, and cannot claim the name Christian.

5. The disciples of Jesus **will be known by all because of their love for one another**. John records these words of Jesus in John 13:34,35. We haven't yet studied the various Greek words translated "love" in the NT, but I believe this would be a good time to introduce them. The English word "love" used in the NT is oft misunderstood and causes much confusion and misunderstanding. In my opinion, most people use the word to refer to the warm emotional feelings one person has for another. Because of their misunderstanding of the word "love" they stumble over a verse such as Matthew 5:44. They feel that living a Christian life is impossible, because how could one have a warm emotional feeling for one's enemy? Such a hurdle seems impossible to overcome, so they either give up at the outset or after a period of time as they become increasingly frustrated with their inability to change their feelings toward another. I believe the world would be a much better place if people only understood what Jesus commands us to do in Matthew 5:44.

The Greeks seemed to understand the nature of "love" better than modern man, or

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at least their language allowed them to express this emotion more effectively. An English-speaking person may express his/her "love" for anyone/anything from their spouse to their favorite food. Even the "love" between husband and wife is multifaceted, including a friendship emotion, a familial dedication, and a sexual union. The Greeks had a different word for each of these types of "love." If a Greek wished to express a tender affection for another, they would use the word "phileo." If they wished to speak of the erotic love between husband and wife, they would use yet another word. If they were discussing a self-sacrificing will which always seeks the best for another, they would use the word "agape." Which of these words do you believe is predominantly used in the New Testament? You're right--the words "agape" or "agapao" (the verb form of the word) are used 258 times in the NT. "Phileo" is translated "love" only 22 times, and "kiss" another 3. So the word "love" is expressing a self-sacrificing concern for another at a rate of 10:1 over the tender affection expressed by "phileo." But when people read "love", what do they think? They picture themselves having a tender affection for someone who perhaps has wronged them in an inconceivable fashion. Jesus doesn't expect this of us! However, He does expect us to always have the good of another foremost in our minds, irregardless of our emotional feelings for that person. This is the type of "love" other men will witness in a true disciple of Christ. This is the love Jesus had for us. While we were yet sinners, God commended His love for us by allowing Christ to die on the cross (Romans 5:8). Jesus tells us that He has given us a new commandment, to love (agapao) one another as He has loved us (John 13:34). What did Jesus forsake on our behalf to come to this earth, to suffer as He suffered during His life and eventually His death? Paul tells us in Philippians 2:6-8 that He didn't consider

being equal with God a thing to be grasped (counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, ASV), but emptied Himself (ASV), taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. His love for us was truly agape!

SUMMARY

In this brief study I've tried to show through the scriptures what is required before one may truly wear the name Christian. In my introduction I asked whether the Bible intended for people of several different religious organizations to carry the same name, or do men misuse the word "Christian." I believe we have seen within the word of God that men without a doubt misuse this word in a grievous fashion. Just as the English word "love" has been so widely used for so many unrelated purposes, thereby rendering it weak in expressing one's true thoughts, the word "Christian" has been misapplied to so many unrelated groups of people that it no longer carries the meaning it once did. I'm sure Satan is "jumping for joy" at this fact. If he can convince people they are in a saved state by believing a lie, he will have succeeded in directing multitudes down the "broad way" which leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). In the very next paragraph after warning men of the broad way Jesus tells us to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15). Was it mere coincidence that Jesus followed such a grave warning (that many will travel the broad way which leads to destruction) with the warning that we be on guard for false teachers? I in no way believe so! These false teachers will be the vehicle by which millions will travel the road to hell! He tells us these prophets come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. How will we know the false proph-

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ets when they come our way? By their fruits! What is implied in this warning? Jesus tells us that we can know which fruits are good, and which are bad! If we cannot know the good fruit from the bad, it would have been pointless for Jesus to tell us to look for the bad fruit to determine which prophets are false! Where do we find the "measuring stick" to separate the good from the bad? In the truth, which we all now understand is the word of God (John 17:17). John warns us to "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Whose responsibility is it to try the spirits? Each and every individual's who desires to spend eternity in heaven. Who was called "more noble" in the book of Acts, and for what reason were they so called? The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians because they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily to see if the things they were told were true (Acts 17:10-12)! How like the Bereans are you as you study the scriptures with me? You must have the same attitude as they--you must receive the word with all readiness of mind, and confirm the truth for yourselves by studying the scriptures! In my preparation for these studies I have been awestruck by the confidence many people place in another human being with regard to their eternal destiny. Many look at the words of a "priest" or other religious figure as being absolute truth! Their trust in the words of another man ignores completely the warning of Jesus in Matthew 7:15. Please determine for yourselves what is truth and what is a lie! The grand trappings of modern "religion" mean nothing to God. He desires men to worship Him in spirit and in truth! As John the Baptist told those who came to be baptized of him, "God is able to of these stones raise up children unto Abraham" (Luke 3:8).

What is too hard for God to accomplish? He has demonstrated His power again and again throughout the scriptures. Everything is His anyway. What He wants from us is that over which He has relinquished control to us: our hearts! He has given us the ability to choose for ourselves whom we will worship. The grandeur of modern cathedrals, the beauty of the music played within them, the majesty and piety of those adorned for the services all appeal to our flawed sense of what God desires in worship. We feel that God cannot be displeased with something so beautiful. But what we have seen in scripture after scripture is unimpeachable: God is pleased only with obedience! As Samuel told Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22-23, "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." Please study carefully 1 Samuel 15:1-23 and consider the complete account of Saul's sin. As you do so, ask yourselves this question, "How bad does Saul's disobedience appear to me?" Notice how his motives sounded good. But God isn't interested in good motives. He is only interested in obedience! I pray that each of you will take to heart what we have learned in this study and determine to manifest the characteristics of a true disciple in your lives. By so doing you may confidently wear the name "Christian" and be assured of your place in heaven to live with the Lord forever. Nothing else on this earth is more important.

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