

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

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

Much of the opposition and criticism which Christians receive is due to ignorance and misunderstandings of what a Christian actually is. From the very beginning there were false accusations against Christians in the Roman Empire.

Christians were accused of cannibalism! *“You Christians eat the flesh and drink the blood of people during your ceremonies!”* Because the Lord’s Supper symbolically refers to eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Lord Jesus, certain Romans, either out of ignorance or malice, spread the rumour that the Christians were actually involved in human sacrifice and cannibalism!

Christians were accused of incest! *“You Christian marry your brothers and sisters!”* As Christians referred to everyone in the church as their *“brothers”* and *“sisters”* in Christ, outsiders misunderstood this Spiritual brotherhood and accused believers of marrying close relatives.

It may surprise you to know that for the first three centuries of the Christian Church believers were accused of Atheism! Because Christians refused to worship the gods of Rome they were attacked as *“Atheists!”* When Christians were being condemned to death in the arena the cry often was: *“Away with the Atheists!”*

Because Christians refused to worship the idols of Rome they were also accused of causing every natural disaster that occurred. *“You Christians have offended the gods and our ancestral spirits!”*

Christians were also accused of lack of patriotism and *“treason!”* For refusing to worship the emperor Christians were condemned as *“traitors.”* It is worth noting that the early Christians were not persecuted for worshipping the Lord Jesus. The Romans were polytheists, they believed in many gods, and could not care what gods were worshipped. The *“crime”* of the early church was that they refused to worship the State.

Christians were also accused of disrupting business. The idol making industry was outraged by the drop in business caused by Gospel preaching. The Book of Acts describes the mob attack against Christians in Thessalonica where it was exclaimed: *“These who have turned the world upside down have come here to!”* Acts 17:6

Christianity most certainly does turn the world upside down, or rather right side up. Preaching against sin has often been regarded as anti-social behaviour. By steadfastly campaigning for an end to the slave trade and slavery itself, Christians were perceived as radical and a threat to the social order. In the wake of the great Evangelical Awakenings and Revivals, bars and brothels have been closed down and those who made their living by enticing poor people to gamble have suffered dramatic loss in *“business.”* Today the opposition of Christians to pornography, perversion and abortion provokes similar hostility.

However, quite aside from the distortions caused by anti-Christian propaganda, there is also a widespread ignorance of what a Christian really is. It is natural that people should be outraged at the extravagance of some high-profile *“christians”* such as popes and tele-evangelists. All Christians share the general disgust at hypocrisy and scandals. However, the Lord Jesus declared: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”* Matthew 7:21

Christianity is all about Christ. It is not about nominal Christians, ministers and denominations. Cults idolize leaders. Religions follow ritual. But true Christians have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”
Matthew 16:24

Webster’s dictionary distinguishes between nominal Christians and real Christians. A nominal Christian is defined as: *“A believer in the religion of Christ. A professor in his belief in the religion of Christ.”* However, Webster’s dictionary then makes it clear what a real Christian is: *“A real disciple of Christ; one who believes in the truth of the Christian religion, and studies to follow the example, and obey the precepts, of Christ. A believer in Christ who is characterized by real piety... relating to Christ.”*

The word Christian only appears in the Bible twice. In the Book of Acts Christians are most often described as: *“Disciples”, “Believers”* and *“Followers of the Way.”*

Many people who today claim to be Christians, or are assumed to be Christians, could not accurately be described as Disciples or Followers of the Way, because they are not under the discipline of Christ, seeking to follow His example and obey His commands. Neither can many of the theologians who train ministers be called: “Believers.” If they deny the inerrancy of Scripture, and don’t believe in the Deity of Christ and the Trinity, in many cases even doubting or denying the existence of God Himself, can they in any sense be called Believers?

So, what does the Bible actually teach as to what a Christian truly is? The attitudes and actions which should characterize the Christian are made clear by what we are called to be and what we must do.

1. A Christian is a **disciple**. A disciple is one who gives up everything (Luke 14:33); denies himself (Matthew 16:24); takes up his cross (Mark 8:34) and follows the example of Jesus (1Peter 2:21). Disciples are identified by their dedication to the Word of God (John 8:31) and love for the people of God (John 8:34).

“Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be my Disciple.” Luke 14: 27

2. A Christian is a **free man** (1 John 3:8; Ephesians 1:7; Galatians 1:4; Hebrews 2:14-15). The Word of God is the truth (John 17:17) that sets us free (John 8:32). A Christian is someone who has surrendered to the Word of God (James 1:21-25) and received the freedom that can only come through Christ (John 8:36). Millions of Christians worldwide can testify of how the Lord Jesus freed them from addictions to smoking, drunkenness, gambling and drugs.

As the converted slave trader John Newton testified in his famous hymn, **Amazing Grace**: *“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see...Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come; ‘tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”* Christians are freed from slavery to sin and satan, subservience to the world’s pressures and conformity to public opinion. We are set free to serve Christ.

“Freedom is what we have – Christ has set us free; stand then as free people, and do not allow yourself to become slaves again.” Galatians 5:1

3. Christians are called to be **holy** – set apart for the exclusive use of God (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 1:15; Hebrews 13:12) ***“...without holiness no one will see the Lord.”*** Hebrews 12:14

4. A Christian is a **servant** (Matthew 20:26-28; Mark 9:35; John 13:15; Luke 17:10). Jesus declared that He came to serve, and we are to follow His example and be concerned above all else with meeting the needs of others (Matthew 25:40; Luke 12:47-48; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

“Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions, and in truth.” John 3:18

5. A Christian is a **pilgrim** (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We do not belong to this world (John 15:18-19). We are just passing through. We belong to the Kingdom of Heaven and as pilgrims we must press on towards it. We have a call, and we need to be persistent in seeking after God’s best. We have a vision and we need to proclaim our Faith (Hebrews 11:8-16). We cannot turn back. We are pressing forward towards something far better.

“You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:13

6. A Christian is also described in the Bible as an **athlete**. We have to keep ourselves in training for a Godly life, doing Spiritual exercises (1 Timothy 4:7-8). We are to rid ourselves of all unnecessary weight and free ourselves from all known sin, throwing aside every encumbrance and running with determination and endurance (Hebrews 12:1). As with any athlete who runs to win, we need to submit to strict discipline, run straight, harden our body and control our movements (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). We have to obey the rules (2 Timothy 2:5). Run our best and run the full distance (2 Timothy 4:7).

“Run in such a way as to get the prize...a crown that will last forever.” 1 Corinthians 9:24-25

7. The Bible also describes the Christian as a **worker** (Matthew 20:1-16). As workers for the Lord (Colossians 3:23), we are always to do our best (2 Timothy 2:15), wholeheartedly (Luke 9:62) and everything we do is to be done in love (1 Corinthians 16:14).

“Keep busy always in your work for the Lord, since you know that nothing you do in the Lord’s service is every useless.” 1 Corinthians 15:58

8. The Scriptures also describe a Christian as a **soldier** (2 Timothy 2:3-4). We have a spiritual enemy to fight (Ephesians 6:12-13). We have a spiritual war to win (Romans 13:12-14). We have spiritual weapons that are powerful to the destroying of strongholds, to the destroying of false arguments, and to the pulling down of every proud obstacle raised against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:35). Therefore we are to be disciplined (2 Timothy 2:3); motivated (Acts 20:24); obedient (1 Timothy 6:14); prepared (Ephesians 6:10-12); alert (1 Peter 5:8-9); using the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), which is the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12). We need to fight evil (Romans 12:21); resist the Devil (James 4:7); bind the powers of evil (Matthew 18:18); enforce the victory of the cross (Colossians 2:15); attack the strongholds of the enemy (2 Corinthians 10:4); storm the gates of hell (Matthew 16:18-19); set the prisoners free (Isaiah 61:1); winning the victory in Jesus Name (1 Corinthians 15:57).

“We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” Romans 8:37

9. Christians are also described as **the salt of the earth** (Matthew 5:13).
As salt preserves – we should preserve that which is holy, good and right.
As salt heals – we should heal the brokenhearted with encouragement, comfort, love in action and prayer.
As salt melts – we should melt the cold hearts with the warmth of our love and enthusiasm of our faith.

As salt creates thirst – we should make people thirst for the living waters of Christ (John 7:37-38).

10. Christians are also called to be **light for the world** (Matthew 5:14-16). As Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), so Christians are to reflect the light of Christ to a dark world.
11. The Scripture also describes the Christian as **a farmer** (Matthew 21:28-32). Christians are to care for God's vineyard (Matthew 20:1). We must sow (John 4:37) the seed of the Gospel (Mark 4:14) which will accomplish (Isaiah 55:11) the task of salvation (Romans 1:16). We must plow up the hard ground, water the soil with much prayer (1 Corinthians 3:8) and reap the harvest (John 4:38).

“This is to my Fathers glory that you may bear much fruit so you will be My disciples.”
John 15:8

From all of these Scriptural word pictures of what a Christian should be, it becomes clear that many of the modern misconceptions concerning what a Christian is are inadequate. The superficial, shallow, one-dimensional concept of “*Just open the door of your heart*” brand of half-hearted, churchianity is lukewarm, namby-pamby, wishy-washy, wimpish, weak and weedy. Any Biblical definition of a Christian must include: action, devotion, dedication, perseverance, sacrifice and service.

“He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me, scatters abroad.”
Matthew 12:30

Two Choices

A Christian is one who is born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. He has a real relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. He loves the Lord Jesus with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength. And he seeks to serve and honour Christ in all areas of life. Jesus Christ made it clear that there are two roads – the broad road and the narrow road. There are two gates – the wide gate and the narrow gate. There are two trees – the bad tree which bears the fruit of the flesh: pride, greed, lust, jealousy, envy, bitterness and hatred, and the good tree which bears good fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:19-23).

There are two men: the foolish man and the wise man. They built their houses on two different foundations. The foolish man built his house on the sand of human wisdom, but the wise man built his house upon the of the rock of God's Word. And when the storm rages, when the rain falls, when the floods rise, and the winds blow, it will be clear which house will stand and which will fall. Jesus taught that there are two ultimate destinations: hell or heaven. The broad, popular, easy road leads to hell, whereas the hard, narrow, difficult and unpopular road is the one that leads to eternal life in Heaven (Matthew 7:13-27).

“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua 24:15

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