



FUNDAMENTAL #3

What Exactly Is a Christian?

The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

Acts 11:26b NIV

I was recently at an NCAA certified basketball tournament. My daughter's team came up against a solid team from Oklahoma that included a player who measured 6'6. At first sight, we seemed to be in tall trouble but once the teams hit the court, it was evident that the expectation we had of her size didn't measure up. No pun intended. We confused her height to mean she was highly skilled, but her minutes on the court proved otherwise.

By the same token, it's easy to look at people who call themselves "Christian" and upon closer observation be confused about their actions. After all, it's highly likely you have "Christian" friends whose behavior doesn't measure up to what you'd expect from a follower of Christ. Perhaps your expectation of how Christians are *supposed* to behave have been shattered by poor examples.

So what exactly is a Christian? It's a great question and since the Bible is the authority for the Christian faith, let's see what it has to say about Christians. Here's an interesting fact: the bible only uses the term "Christian" three times!

- "So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." Acts 11:26
- "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'" Acts 26:28
- "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." 1 Pet. 4:16

The name "Christian" comes from a Greek word meaning "a follower of Christ." It wasn't a term Jesus' disciples gave themselves—it was a name given to them by the people living in Antioch, a city comparable to New York City. As with most nicknames, they're given to you by other people based on your character or behavior. For example, Karl Malone, one of the best power forwards in NBA history was given the name "Mailman" while at Louisiana Tech because he "always delivered." George Gervin was nicknamed "The Iceman" because he never sweat (even after a full practice or game) and he always kept his cool on the court. In the same way, "Christian" was a name given to Christ's followers because their behavior and character reflected Christ.

The early day Christians believed Jesus to be the *Christos*, meaning "the anointed one," or Messiah. They believed Jesus was the Son of God and that He came to save them from their



sins. That is the basic belief of Christians worldwide. What do you believe about Jesus? Do you believe he came to save you from your sins? Do you consider yourself to be a Christian? If not, do you know what you must do to be saved? It's an age old question. In fact, in Acts 16:30, the jailer assigned to Silas and Paul during their imprisonment asked them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" In other words, "*What must I do to become a Christian?*"

Consider this: what if a young athlete asked, "What must I do to become a professional basketball player?" The answer would likely include a long and exhaustive list of things of things that would have to be done. The athlete would have to work on those things day after day, year after year, and only *hope* they had done enough to earn their way onto a college roster and possibly play in the NBA or WNBA. Statistics show that only 3.4% of male, senior high players end up playing NCAA college basketball; slightly higher for girls, 4.0%. Of those athletes, only 1.3% of NCAA male, senior players are drafted into the NBA and only 1% of female players are drafted into the WNBA. So, the likelihood of putting in all that work and *still* not being good enough is a very real probability.

I have some great news! Becoming a Christian is not like becoming a collegiate or professional basketball player. And being saved does not involve a long and exhaustive list of things you have to do. That would be what we call "religion." Religion is full of manmade rules and ceremonies dictating what you have to do in order to be saved. Romans 1:16 says, it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, not the power of man! In fact, after the jailer asked Paul and Silas what he had to do to be saved, they didn't give him a long list of to-do's. Instead, they responded with, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved..." Really? That's it? You mean we don't have to *work* our way to heaven? No! In fact, you don't have to do *any work* at all! Jesus Christ already did the work for you on the cross!

So then, what *is* required of you? In two words, BELIEVE and RECEIVE. *Believe* the gospel message of Jesus Christ and *receive* his free gift of grace. The gospel, (also referred to as the "good news") can be wrapped up in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 as recorded by the Apostle Paul: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to over 500 witnesses. That's a lot of eyewitnesses! So in a sense, we're not just asked to believe in a set of principles taught by the church, but in *real, powerful, historical events* that were witnessed and recorded in ancient documents—events that were exactly as the Scriptures predicted!

So what else do professing Christians believe? Christ-followers believe, *through faith*, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that through believing in Him and obeying his Word, we will inherit eternal life. Christians believe that Jesus died for all mankind, paying the penalty for

our sin, and that He will come again. Christians believe in the Trinity—God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct persons in one!

The Holy Spirit is a free gift we receive the moment we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and make him Lord of our lives. The Holy Spirit acts as our counselor, comforter, advocate, guide, teacher, friend, coach and so much more (Matt. 3:17, John 3:16, Rom. 5:8, Heb. 9:28, Eph. 1:13-14, John 14: 25-26).

Many people think they must behave a certain way in order to become a Christian or “clean up their act” before they can enter the church doors; however, the Bible explains that becoming a Christian is not about behavior but about responding to Jesus' offer of forgiveness. When people are serious about inviting Jesus into their lives, they want to behave differently because their relationship with God changes them from the inside out. Likewise, when athletes are genuinely serious about developing their skills, they don't do things the way they used to. Patterns of practice change, the amount of hours spent in the gym increases, their spirit of determination shifts, and as a result, so does their game. Becoming a great player is an inside out process as well. It starts deep within the heart. Proof of that commitment and dedication will be evident, just as it is when Jesus does a work in your heart.

In summary, to become a Christian...

- You must *believe*, in faith, that there is only one true God (Isa. 44:6).
- You must *believe*, in faith, that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1:14).
- You must *believe* that Jesus died for all your sins, was buried and rose from the dead after three days, according to scripture (1 Cor. 5:3-4).
- You must *believe* that you are a sinner in need of a Savior (Luke 19:10).
- You must *confess* and *repent* of your sins (1 John 1:9).
- You must *receive* Jesus as your Savior. Upon doing so, you become a child of God, and God's children are called to behave differently (John 1:12).
- You are called to *set yourself apart* to be holy, just as God is holy and to be a light in a dark world (1 Pet. 1:16, Matt. 5:16).

Being set apart from the world doesn't mean you can't have fun! On the contrary, you can still have tons of fun! Nevertheless, we shouldn't participate in the things that go against the nature of God, such as illegal drug use, underage drinking, using profanity, disrespecting teachers and parents, having *any* type of sex outside of marriage, etc. Most assuredly, Jesus died for all those sins, and more! If you have already participated in any of these activities, (or in the future), don't lose heart! There is not one sin that Jesus' blood didn't cover on the cross. However, when you come to that moment when you fully surrender your life to Jesus, the desire to do these things should diminish, reflecting your appreciation and love for the great price Jesus Christ paid for you on the cross.

Not only should we set ourselves apart by our lifestyle, but we should set ourselves apart by getting away with Jesus as often as possible to read his Word, spend time in prayer, and allow God an opportunity to speak back. The more often we read biblical truth, the temptation to cave into ungodly temptations becomes less difficult.

Have you ever made a deliberate decision to set yourself apart from the rest of the world by accepting Jesus as the Lord of your life? Romans 10:9 promises, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” It’s that simple!

I would love to encourage you to start a personal relationship with the One who created you and loves you, *no matter what you’ve done*, by inviting Him into your life. You can do that by talking to God through prayer. If you aren’t sure how to pray, I’ve included some sample prayers for you in the next chapter. IMPORTANT: there is no such thing as a magic prayer! If you choose to use one of these prayers, please understand, it’s not the words in the prayer that save you. Only Jesus Christ has the power to save. Salvation is a matter of the heart, not a matter of words.

Personal Training Session

- Do you have a nickname? If so, what does it mean and why was it given to you?
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- If you consider yourself to be a Christian, do you believe you have reflected Christianity well? If not, what can you do to change that?
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- Look up 1 Peter 2:9-10 on being set apart. What has God called you out of?
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Post-Game Prayer

Most High God, you have called me out of the darkness to give me a new life. You have set me apart for a special purpose and have a divine plan for my life. You have laid the truth of who you are right in front of me. All I have to do is believe it and receive it. Jesus said in John 5:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (ESV). Your word leaves no doubt about the decision that is before me. If I have never made the decision to *truly* follow you, lay that on my heart right now. And if I have, may I recommit my heart to



follow you as one who has already been given the gift of eternal life—wholeheartedly loving you from this day forward. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.