

Who Is a Christian?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The term “Christian” is found three times in the New Testament. It is employed initially in conjunction with the ministry of Barnabas and Saul in Antioch of Syria.

[T]he disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Later, when pressed with evidence for the validity of the Christian system, Herod Agrippa II said:

Almost you persuade me to be a Christian (26:28).

The King James Version suggests a man who is wrestling with his conscience. Others feel that the ruler’s remark is cynical: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (NIV). Perhaps the truth is somewhere between the two. The king’s comment may reflect a **respectful evasion**.

Finally, Peter writes:

[I]f any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name (1 Peter 4:16).

Some—especially those who are enamored with humanly devised religious titles—contend that the name Christian was initially given in derision. Moffatt suggested that it was “coined by the pagan slang” of the citizens of Antioch (1906, 316), and countless others have echoed that sentiment, including some of the restoration heritage (Campbell 1914, 95).

We reject this assertion for the following reasons:

1. The Old Testament spoke of a new and everlasting name to be bestowed upon the people of God in the gospel age (Isa. 56:5, 6; 62:2; 65:14, 15). If this was not the name “Christian,” then what was the new name?
2. Isaiah especially associated the reception of the new name with the call of the Gentiles (Isa. 62:2); the name Christian was not given until the Gentiles were admitted into the church (cf. Acts 10; 11:26).
3. The term *chrematizo* (translated “were called” – Acts 11:26) is employed nine times in the New Testament. It is, without exception, used in contexts wherein the calling is of God. Some suggest that the grammatical construction of this passage indicates that the name was bestowed by Barnabas and Saul—by divine authority (Woods 1976, 67).
4. It is inconceivable that Peter would have encouraged the early saints to “glorify God” (1 Peter 4:16) by the use of a paganistically bestowed “slang” term. The early disciples did not adopt other pejorative titles (cf. Acts 24:5,14).
5. Paul rebuked the Corinthian brothers for wearing human names, e.g., Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, because, he said, these men were not crucified for them, nor were they immersed into their names (1 Cor. 1:12, 13). Clearly, the implication is that since Christ was crucified for them, and as they had been baptized into his name, they had the right to wear His name. What would that have been if not “Christian?”
6. There is another indication that the Christian name was divinely bestowed. James wrote concerning that “honorable name” which the Christians had “called upon” (passive voice form) them (2:7). “This expression clearly reveals its OT background (Deut. 28:10; 2 Chron. 7:14; Amos 9:12). A man was dedicated to God by calling God’s name over him. The act indicated that he belonged to God. So Christians bear the worthy name of Christ as indication that they are his people” (Burdick 1981, 179).

Granted, then, the term was divinely imposed, and thus is to be worn with honor and dignity. The issue now is: precisely who is a Christian?

How Not To Identify a Christian

Before addressing this theme positively, let us consider some false standards by which some are perceived as Christians.

An American

A few might reason thusly: America is a Christian nation; but I am a citizen of this nation; thus, I am a Christian. The major premise of the argument is false. America is not a Christian nation. No nation (except that **spiritual** nation, the church – Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9) is Christian. One is not a Christian by virtue of residence.

A Moralist

Others would suggest that if one lives by high moral principles, he or she is surely a Christian person. If one is a providing father, loving mother, or benevolent neighbor then the individual is perceived as a Christian.

But what of the Jew who attempts to live an ethical life? Is he a Christian? He certainly would repudiate the designation!

Or consider the case of Bertrand Russell. The British philosopher was once asked this question: “Can an agnostic be a Christian?” He replied:

If you mean by a “Christian” a man who loves his neighbor, who has wide sympathy with suffering, and who ardently desires a world freed from the cruelties and abominations which at present disfigure it, then, certainly, you will be justified in calling me a Christian (1975, 289).

Was Russell a Christian in **any** sense of the term? Far from it. He once gave a lecture, later printed and widely distributed, titled “Why I am not a Christian” (1967). One is not a Christian merely because he endorses certain moral principles that are taught in the Scriptures.

A Theist

Some would argue, perhaps, that one who merely believes in God is a Christian. Certainly all Christians believe in God, but not everyone who believes in God is a Christian. Jews believe in God, and so do Moslems, but neither are Christians—nor do they profess to be.

We must remember that belief in God, without a corresponding faith in Christ, is worthless. Jesus declared:

[He] that rejects me, rejects him that sent me (Luke 10:16).

The Lord was unyielding in His declaration:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).

A “Faith Only” Believer in Christ

There is a vast body of people that endorses the concept that anyone who believes in Christ (i.e., he subscribes to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God) is a Christian person. That simply is not the case. Note this principle. During the personal ministry of Jesus, there were Jews who observed his miracles and who believed the message he proclaimed; yet, they were still identified as children of Satan.

Consider the case detailed in John 8. The record indicates that as the Lord taught, “many believed on him” (8:30). Christ thus spoke to those who “had believed him” (8:31). As the dialog became heated, Jesus charged:

You are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father it is your will to do (8:44).

They were believers in a sense, yet still unregenerate.

Or reflect further upon the episode of chapter twelve.

Nevertheless even of the rulers many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the glory that is of men more than the glory that is of God (12:42-43).

Will anyone be so reckless as to contend that these “believers” were right with God? It takes more than mere mental belief in the Lord to bring about one’s salvation.

A Church Member

Some feel that so long as one is a member of some church he or she must be a Christian. What of those who are members of the Unitarian Universalist Church? These folks do not even believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Are they Christians simply because they are members in a “church”?

Hundreds of churches populate our land of which God is not the author. All Christians are in the church of Jesus Christ, but not all “church members” are Christians.

Baptized People

Many doubtless believe that anyone who has submitted to a form of “Christian baptism” is obviously a Christian. The problem with that is this. Not every person who has surrendered to “baptism” has yielded to the **genuine** rite, as the ordinance is set forth in the New Testament.

For example, some have had water sprinkled upon them, believing this was baptism, when, in fact, sprinkling (or pouring) is not baptism at all. Baptism is an **immersion** in water (Balz and Schneider 1990, 192ff), and nothing short of that is in harmony with the will of God.

Aside from that, it is possible to be immersed and still not be a Christian, provided the teaching received prior to the act was either incomplete or inaccurate. The case in Acts 19 demonstrates this. When Paul arrived in Ephesus he encountered twelve men who had been immersed with the baptism that had been operative during the ministry of John the Baptizer. Obviously, however, they had submitted to John’s baptism after it had already become obsolete. Thus, even though the form (i.e., immersion) was correct, their understanding of other matters was deficient.

These men were thus not Christians. However, they became such when they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus (19:5; cf. 2:38; 22:16).

It is imperative that one have accurate teaching and a proper comprehension (e.g., the purpose of the ordinance) before submitting to baptism, if he expects to be recognized by God as a Christian.

Becoming a Christian

How does one become a Christian? The answer to this important question is not dependent upon idle speculation. Clear and compelling biblical evidence reveals the truth of this matter.

Consider Matthew’s record of the Great Commission.

Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (28:19,20).

The verb *matheteusate* (“make disciples”) is in the imperative mood (a command), and is followed by a participle (“baptizing”) which sets forth “the manner in which the given action was performed” (Green 1907, 332). Thus a person is made a “disciple” (in this specialized use of the term) by being immersed into a relationship with the sacred Trinity.

Later disciples become known as “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Thus one becomes a disciple (in a technical sense) or a Christian when he is immersed into Christ.

Those who refuse immersion, as that ordinance is precisely described in the New Testament, are simply not Christians — no matter how sincere they may be. An emotional inclination toward the Son of God is no substitute for genuine obedience.

Paul made it clear that wearing the name of Christ (i.e., being a Christian) was dependent upon accepting the fact that the Lord was crucified on one’s behalf, and being immersed into his name (1 Corinthians 1:13). Anyone who neglects either of these components cannot be recognized as a Christian.

An analysis of 1 Peter 4:16,17 further clarifies this issue. We reproduce the passage as follows, emphasizing certain key expressions.

But if any man suffer as a **Christian**, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name. For the time is come for judgment to begin at the **house of God**: and if it begin first at **us**, what shall be the end of them that **obey not the gospel** of God?

There are several equivalent terms as the foregoing emphases reveal. To be a **Christian** is the same as being in the **house of God**. But the **house of God** is the **church** (1 Timothy 3:15). Thus, it is clear that **Christians are in the church**.

But membership in the **church** is the same as membership in the **body** (Colossians 1:18,24). Therefore, **Christians** are those who are in the **body of Christ**. However, one is **baptized into the body** (1 Corinthians 12:13).

We are thus driven to the conclusion that only those who have been biblically immersed are Christians. Note also, as suggested above, that the Christian is set in vivid contrast to those who have not obeyed the gospel.

The foregoing considerations make it apparent that there are strict scriptural conditions for becoming a Christian. The loose way in which the term “Christian” is employed today is not at all consistent with the biblical use of this sacred designation.

Wearing the Name with Fidelity

Is it possible that a child of God can so live as to become unworthy of wearing the name of Christ? Can he reach a state where the appellation “Christian” really does not even apply any more? There is an indication that this is possible.

The word “Christian,” as it appears in the Greek New Testament, is *Christianos*. The suffix *ianos* is not uncommon in the literature of the first century. It basically means “belonging to.” It was attached to certain words to denote one who was a slave of, or adherent of, a person or movement (Free and Vos 1992, 264). Thus a *Kaisarianos* was a slave who belonged to Caesar. A *Herodian* was a devotee of the Herod dynasty (cf. Matthew 22:16). There was a first-century sect known as the *Augustiani*. The para-military supporters of this movement adored Nero and followed him everywhere (Turner 1981, 66). Thus, by way of literary analogy, “Christian” might suggest a devotee of Jesus who was willing to follow his Master anywhere.

In discussing the term *chrematizo* (“were called” – Acts 11:26), W.E. Vine said that the primary significance of the term denoted having business dealings with someone. He suggested that the Christians were so named because serving Christ was their “chief business” (1940, 165).

The question is: do we really make it our business to serve the Lord faithfully each day?

Kistemaker raises an interesting point.

The name Christian means that you completely identify with Christ because you are his disciple. But for many Christians this identification seems to apply only in a Sunday worship service. During the week many Christians appear to have put aside the Christian nametag that they display on Sundays. . . . How do some Christians live? Some live for the sake of money; others are in the process of destroying their bodies through chemical dependence; and still others use vile and profane language as a part of their daily speech. "Why are you a Christian?" is personal and to the point. It makes many Christians blush (1990, 423,424).

There is another question that we should briefly raise. Since it is possible for a child of God to fall from the faith (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 4:1), drift into error, and so be worthy of disfellowship (Romans 16:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; Titus 3:10), when such occurs, is it appropriate to continue referring to such people as "Christians"?

I simply do not understand the rationale which argues that there are "Christians" in "practically all the denominations known today," as many contend. When one ceases to embrace the teaching of Jesus Christ, he is no longer worthy of the Lord's name.

Every Christian should resolve that he will not wear the name of Christ in a vain or degrading way. May we indeed glorify God in this name (1 Peter 4:16).

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Scripture References

Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16; Isaiah 56:5, 6, 62:2, 65:14, 15; Isaiah 62:2; Acts 10; Acts 24:5, 14; 1 Corinthians 1:12, 13; Deuteronomy 28:10; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Amos 9:12; Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9; Luke 10:16; John 14:6; John 8; Acts 19; 1 Corinthians 1:13; 1 Peter 4:16, 17; 1 Timothy 3:15; Colossians 1:18, 24; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Matthew 22:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 4:1; Romans 16:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; Titus 3:10

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