

# What does it mean to be a Christian?

## The origin and usage of the word “Christian”

According to **Acts 11:26** the **disciples of Christ** were called Christians.

**...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

The Greek word for Christian (*christianos*) is derived from the word Christ (*Christos*). So likewise today, a person can be considered a Christian if he follows Jesus Christ.

A **disciple** is someone who strives to understand and imitate his Master. The decisions he makes in his life are based on what he learns from his Master's life and teaching.

**And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them: If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. (Mark 8:34-35)**

According to the New Testament everyone who follows Jesus is also called a child of God.

**Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God... (John 1:12 NIV)**

A follower of Jesus receives the gift of eternal life. He is spiritually reborn, allowing God to lead and form him. A child of God chooses to obey his Father.

**By this we know that we have come to know Him if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 John 2:3-4)**

As long as a person refuses to submit his life to the holy God he is spiritually dead because of his sins.

**So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31-36)**

Jesus wants everyone to be saved. If a person repents (regrets and turns from his sins), Jesus makes him free. He is made **holy** by God and is given the power to live a completely new life in God.

**...that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:22-24)**

Every member of the church has been sanctified (made holy) and is therefore a saint (Philippians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1).

As children of God all Christians have one Father, God. So the relationship among believers is a **brotherly** relationship.

**But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (Matthew 23:8-12)**

**He said, "Who are My mother and My brother?" Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:33-35)**

Therefore we can use the terms **disciple, child of God, saint** and **brother/sister** synonymously with **Christian**.

## **How can we know who is a Christian?**

Christian life is based on the acceptance of salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus sets Christians free from sin. He reveals the truth to them so they are able to understand the **right teaching** about God's nature and **live a holy life in his will**. Having the right teaching and living according to the will of God are inseparably connected to each other.

Unfortunately there are many so-called churches around today that do not conform to these biblical standards. It is possible to see whether a religious denomination is biblical by thoroughly examining its teaching and lifestyle. It is more difficult though, to see whether the individual members are Christians because there is often a wide range of differing practices and opinions concerning faith within a single group because of the lack of effort made to reach deep unity. However, there are some essential elements belonging to a relationship with God which show clearly who lives with God.

### **a) Living according to the will of God**

Becoming a Christian involves a conscious decision to follow Jesus. This is also known as repentance. John 1:12, quoted above, speaks about the necessity of "receiving" or accepting Jesus, showing that becoming a Christian is based on a decision. Not everyone who decides to follow Jesus knows the exact point in time when he made that decision. In some cases the decision to hand control of one's life over to God is the result of gradual positive steps, putting into practice what one has understood, and cannot be pinpointed to a certain date or a special experience.

The consequence of repentance (Greek: metanoia = change of mind) is that the new person sees the world with new eyes. He has a new system of values and lives for other aims than before he knew God. Through repentance the broken relationship between man and his creator is restored and it is through this relationship that a Christian lives according to the will of God. God makes his Holy Spirit to dwell within each Christian, enabling him to live a holy life.

**For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Romans 8:14)**

Repentance means regretting and leaving behind one's former sins and devoting oneself to seeking and doing good.

**But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)**

**Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)**

The life of a Christian is a continuous process of sanctification. God works within each Christian to conform him more and more to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). That does not mean that a Christian is without sin for the rest of his life, but that he basically separates from sin. The result of this sanctification must be visible in the life of every Christian (John 15:1-10) because God gives him the power to strive for a holy life (2 Peter 1:3; Romans 6:12-14).

**For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. (Romans 8:2)**

The fruit of having a relationship with God is visible in the good a Christian does, manifested principally in brotherly love.

**So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith. (Galatians 6:10)**

Brotherly love (the love among believers) is the sign by which the disciples of Jesus are recognised (John 13:34-35). Brotherly love is based on the decision of each Christian to devote his life to his brothers and sisters.

**We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:16)**

The knowledge of God's own loving nature is what leads Christians to devote themselves completely to serving God and others.

**The one who does not love does not know God for God is love. (1 John 4:8)**

**...anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)**

Relationships among brothers and sisters in faith differ from other relationships because Christians have the same attitude towards life and share the same hope and aim in life. Since a Christian is not in unity with unbelievers in these points the amount of co-operation possible is limited, but even in this case Christians must do what they can to encourage mutual respect and a peaceful coexistence.

**"I have been baptised so I am a Christian..."**

Some people think that a person becomes a Christian through baptism. In **Romans 2:28-29** we can read:

**For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit...**

In the same way it is the inward change that is important for becoming a Christian and baptism is only an outward expression of the inward change.

## **“I am a good person...”**

There is an important difference between being a “good” person and being a Christian. Somebody can have many good attributes, he can even be a devoted helper or a generous person, but these things do not make him a Christian. Good attributes are advantageous for others on a certain level, but they can only be used in the best way after a person has repented to God. If a person wants to be “good” without repenting to God, there is a danger that his “goodness” or “greatness” will cause others to respect and honour him instead of honouring and following Jesus.

The example of the rich man (Luke 18:18-30) also shows that Jesus expects **full submission to God** from his disciples. The rich man was also a “good” man. No doubt, he really did follow the commandments Jesus mentioned (at least to a certain degree). Nevertheless, he himself sensed that something was still missing for him to receive eternal life. We can see from Jesus’ answer that the superficial compliance with a list of laws is not enough. Jesus points out what the man does not want to put in God’s hand. Jesus claims ownership over our whole life, as Peter recognised in this situation and said: “We have left our own homes and followed You” (verse 28).

Following Jesus means seeking what God wants to do with our life in all points and in all moments. We must **be ready to give up everything** because of God. We must turn from our egotism and materialistic pursuits and be ready to let go of our ambitions, careers and hobbies – not only when faced with persecution. We not only have to separate from our sins but we also have to set the right priorities in our life (Luke 9:57-62; Luke 14:25-30). We must be ready to abide in our faith even if our family or friends disagree (Matthew 10: 34-38). We have to accept that they might turn away from us and persecute us.

**We must obey God rather than men! (Acts 5:29)**

## **b) The right teaching**

Jesus said that the Father seeks worshippers who worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23). **Jesus revealed the truth**, as can be seen, for example, in Jesus’ prayer shortly before his death:

**For the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. (John 17:8)**

The gospel, and for that matter the whole word of God, the Bible, has been given as a guide to lead us to understand God’s will. God revealed himself throughout the Old and New Covenants in order to show us how to live. The **truth can be recognised** by everyone – as Paul points out in his second letter to the Corinthians:

**... by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (2 Corinthians 4:2-3)**

Anybody who is ready to obey God can recognise what his will is.

**If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself. (John 7:17)**

The recognition of the truth, i.e. the right understanding of God’s word is the basis of a relationship with God. Knowing God does not only mean understanding theoretically what God wants from us. It means grasping his message wholeheartedly and living in fellowship with Him.

**This is the eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. (John 17:3)**

Therefore the New Testament lays special emphasis on the right teaching, even making it a condition of being saved.

**Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:16)**

False teachings give a wrong understanding of God. The result is that if someone accepts false teachings he does not know the true God and cannot have a real relationship with Him (2 John 9). Only someone who is not willing to submit himself to the truth of God will accept and remain in false teachings.

Today there are numerous denominations which regard themselves as Christian churches. They have an array of different teachings and they offer various forms of religious life where their members are not required to devote themselves to God for a holy life.

Contrary to this, the church, the community of the believers, is built on the teaching of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20). It does not accept new teachings (Galatians 1:9). The church is the pillar and the foundation of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). Its teaching is consistent, undivided and unchanging (1 Corinthians 1:10).

The different denominations cannot be called parts of one church because they have contradictory teachings. This does not mean that nobody can become a Christian in a denomination where false teachings are taught. But if he is growing in faith he will be confronted with the false teachings and he will have to refuse them in order to keep his relationship with God.

See our article "[Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching ...](#)"

## **Why is it important to know who is a Christian?**

In this age of "tolerance" and pluralism it is considered disrespectful to question someone else's belief. The "delicate questions" are often avoided so as not to offend. But a relationship where problems and differences cannot be discussed is not harmonious or honest.

If we take on this thinking that we must not question what another person does or believes, we exclude the possibility of having really deep relationships and community. It would mean that we would not be able to help each other because we cannot see what the others need. However, God's plan is that Christians are accountable to one another and can give one another real support (Hebrews 3:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

Only people who want to obey God belong to the church (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13). The church must hold up a mirror to its contemporaries so that they can see the kind of relationship Christians have with God (Matthew 5:14-16).

Sadly, there are many people who claim to be Christians but who deny it by their deeds. We must examine their faith and show them what is missing in their relationship to God. They have to be called to repentance. That is what it means to really love them, because our desire should always be for everyone to live in obedience to God. It is not possible for Christians to have fellowship with people who consciously decide to live in error. We must not adopt their teaching or their way of thinking (2 John 7-11).

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