

KNOWING & DOING

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Are You a Christian or a Disciple? Is There a Difference? Why It Matters!

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There is considerable confusion among God's people about a very important question: does Jesus Christ offer two acceptable standards for living the Christian life—a less demanding one for “ordinary Christians” and an optional, more challenging version for those who commit themselves to be “disciples”? The way we answer this question is vitally important; it shapes our identity, the way we live, our witness to the watching world, and our rewards in the life to come.

Fortunately this is not an abstract theological issue that is beyond our reach. For the most part, the confusion is rooted in a failure to understand the meaning and use of the words *Christian* and *disciple* in the New Testament. This is actually good news, because the definition of these words can be readily determined and their use in the Bible easily observed. However, most of us have not delved into this deeply. We have absorbed the ideas of a denomination, congregation, pastor, parachurch group, or individual; then we have read these two words through that lens. I encourage you to approach this subject with a commitment to seek truth, whether or not it conforms to your current views. We should all be like the Jews in Berea, who listened to Paul carefully then searched the Scriptures to see if what he said was true (Acts 17:11).

Origin and Meaning of the Word *Christian*

Let's begin by looking at the origin and meaning of the word *Christian* and observe how it is used in the New Testament. Given the fact that it designates the Christian's identity, you may be surprised that this word occurs only three times in the New Testament. But those three are sufficient to tell us what we need to know. In Greek, *Christian* (*Christianos*, *Christianoi*) means “adherents or followers of Christ,”¹ that is, “those who belong to Him,”² or “men of Christ.”³ The word emerged in the pagan city of Syrian Antioch, but how is unclear.

It could have been a term devised by the Gentile believers to distinguish themselves from the local Jews. The renowned New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce recognizes the possibility “that it was the disciples who first began to call themselves Christians, meaning thereby ‘servants of Christ.’”⁴ However, he also suggests, as John Stott and many others do, that the name may have been the natural outgrowth of the believers speaking so much about Christ that Gentiles began to describe them as “the Christ-people, or Christians.”⁵ Stott sees this as positive, since “it marked out the disciples as being, above all, the people, the followers, the servants of Christ.”⁶ C.K. Barrett comments, “the new designation was probably needed when it first became apparent that the believers, who had left their old Gentile way of life, were no more Jews than heathens—in fact, a third race, Christians.”⁷

Others have suggested that *Christian* was a term of derision bestowed by nonbelievers, that the term stuck and was subsequently embraced with honor, as were the names *Puritan* and *Methodist* many centuries later. We can't know for sure, but certainly *Christian* was an apt term. And it was probably a welcome development to distinguish the disciples of Jesus (who had recently fled the rampant persecution in Jerusalem⁸) from the Jewish community in Antioch, which was greatly disliked by the contemporary Greeks. So intensely were the Jews hated that, in AD 40, Gentile mobs killed many of them and destroyed their synagogues.⁹

What we do know about the word *Christian* is that sometime about AD 44–47 in Syria it became a term to refer to the growing number of people who were becoming followers of Jesus Christ. This appears to have been providential, inasmuch as it freed the disciples of Jesus from being seen as Jews and allowed them to carry on the Great Commission.

Three New Testament Occurrences

Additional insight comes from observing how the word *Christian* is used and viewed by Peter and Paul as reflected in its three New Testament occurrences. Taking them in reverse order, we find in 1 Peter, written in the early sixties, on the eve of Nero's persecution, the name *Christian* is used as a badge of honor: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you . . . Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Pet. 4:14, 16).¹⁰ Here Peter not only presupposes the common use of the name *Christian* throughout the Roman Empire; he also sees it as intimately bound up with the name of Christ and urges fellow believers not to be embarrassed by it but rather to glorify God through it. With such a strong endorsement, it is clear that he embraces the name *Christian* as an appropriate term to describe believers in Jesus at that time. Indeed, shortly after penning these words, both Peter and Paul (and many others) would suffer martyrdom in Rome at the hands of Nero for being "Christians."

This same acceptance of the name *Christian* is true of Paul. In Luke's *second* use of the term, King Agrippa, while listening to Paul defend himself in court (AD 57–59), said, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28). The fact that Agrippa used this word to describe those who believed what Paul believed, and that Paul did not contest the word, suggests both its widespread use and its acceptability to Paul as a description of disciples of Jesus.

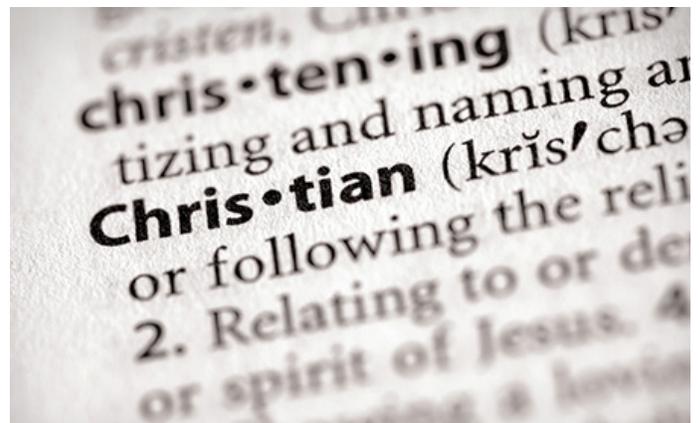
The fact that Peter commended the word and that neither Paul the theologian nor any of the other inspired writers of the New Testament raised any questions about it is strong evidence of apostolic approval.

Luke's *first* use of the name *Christian* gives us an even clearer understanding of what Luke means by the word and its relationship to the word *disciple*—and why Peter and Paul embraced it. In Acts 11:26, he notes that "in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." In other words, the name *Christian* is essentially a synonym for the word *disciple* and does not represent a separate category of believer. Or at least it did not do so in those days. Perhaps the best way to sum up is to say that a *true* Christian was understood to be a disciple of Jesus; there was no difference between the two. Although this equivalence later became distorted, it remains true that in the New Testament, the words *Christian* and *disciple* refer to the same thing.

The Word Disciple

Let's now look at the word *disciple*, which occurs more than 230 times in the Gospels and Acts. Understanding this word is not a matter of simply looking up the basic definition of disciple (*mathetes*) in a standard Greek lexicon. That is certainly a first step. But some have done this and come away with definitions like *learner* and *apprentice*,¹¹ which are correct but far from complete. For an accurate understanding, one must also learn how the word was understood in the context of Jewish and Greco-Roman culture in general and how it was used by Jesus and the gospel writers in particular.¹² Noted New Testament scholar Michael Wilkins, who has researched this subject in great detail, helpfully says a disciple is "one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked on the life of following Jesus."¹³ William Kynes offers an expanded definition: "A disciple is one who responds to the call of Jesus in faith, resulting in a relationship of absolute allegiance and supreme loyalty through which Jesus shares his own life and the disciple embarks on a lifetime of learning to become like his Master."¹⁴

The definitions of Wilkins and Kynes will come as a surprise to many. As noted above, in some churches a disciple is thought to be a Christian who has gone on to make a higher level of commitment to Christ and His lordship than the average Christian. The assumption underlying this idea is that Jesus offers two acceptable standards or levels of commitment.



Unfortunately this view fails to notice that Jesus had only one standard. His earthly ministry (up to the cross) was focused on proclaiming God's kingdom and calling people to discipleship. What this entailed is featured through His work with the twelve, who were first called to be disciples and later chosen to be apostles who would lead the church in the mission of making disciples after His departure. But it is also seen in the many others who became His disciples as His ministry unfolded (Luke 6:13, 17; 19:37; John 4:1; 6:60, 66; 19:38).

The way Jesus uses the word *disciple* in the Great Commission illustrates the point Wilkins makes above. After God raised Jesus from the dead, He gave Him universal authority over heaven and earth. Jesus then commissioned and sent forth His disciples on a universal mission. No longer were they restricted to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). They were now to "go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe [obey] all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). Clearly in this text there is only one category of follower envisioned: a disciple. Just as clearly the mission is focused on one thing: making disciples. And clearer still, making disciples is a matter of bringing lost sinners to salvation in Jesus Christ and helping them understand and obey His teachings.

A closer look at the text clarifies the point. The main verb in this sentence is an imperative *make disciples*. It is supported by three participles, *going*, *baptizing*, and *teaching*, that share some of its imperative force.¹⁵ The participles serve to clarify key aspects of how disciple making works. It begins with trained disciples following the example of Jesus by going out to announce that the kingdom of God was at hand and to invite people to "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Those who respond to this offer of grace are to be baptized and taught to understand and obey all that Jesus commanded His first disciples (found in the Gospels). This was a continuation and expansion of Jesus' ministry of proclaiming God's kingdom and making disciples.

In light of this, how then do we define a disciple of Jesus? In agreement with both Wilkins and Kynes but even more concisely, New Testament scholar Darrell Bock says: "At salvation, a believer becomes a disciple." He goes on to say that "discipleship is a walk that lasts the rest of one's life."¹⁶ Bock lists some of the key aspects of this lifelong discipleship that are emphasized in Luke and Acts: total commitment; love for God and neighbor; prayer; perseverance in suffering; watchfulness, patience and boldness; faith and dependence; joy and praise; testimony and witness; stewardship of wealth and possessions; commitment to the lost.¹⁷ Embracing and maturing in each of these areas takes time and is challenging, but those who receive the grace of God and enter His kingdom are enabled to do so *through the empowering presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit*.

Bock holds together the grace of God and the demands of discipleship in a helpful way: "Since each Christian must still deal with the presence of sin, his or her walk has successes and failures." Total commitment to Christ is necessary, says Bock, and "this is something the disciples struggled to learn, but Jesus makes it clear that an absolute commitment is required for being successful at discipleship . . . Nevertheless, he deals graciously with his followers and their lapses. Intention and core orientation are the point, not perfection."¹⁸

With total commitment to orient us, the Word of God to instruct us, the Spirit of God to empower us, the people of God to support us and a gracious Lord to pardon us, we are able to live out faithful and fruitful discipleship leading to increasing Christlikeness. Whether we do so and to what extent in the years after conversion reveals whether we are a good disciple, a stagnant disciple, or a poor disciple—or even a false disciple (Judas).

Discipleship in the Book of Acts

The book of Acts presents a vivid and inspiring picture of discipleship in the church. The early church was a community of disciples. We see the gospel message proclaimed in various venues by disciples who call people to repent, believe, and be baptized into the fellowship of the church. But it doesn't stop there. Once in the church, converts are to *devote* themselves "to the apostles' teaching [about Jesus] and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This is essential for maturing in discipleship with Jesus, who is now present through the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, these four elements, which were at the heart of church life in Acts 2:42 were also at the heart of Jesus' discipling of the twelve.

The most common word for people who came to saving faith in Jesus in the early church is *disciple*. In other words, those who were saved in Jerusalem at Pentecost and throughout the Roman Empire for years afterward understood themselves to have become disciples of Jesus, like those who had become His disciples during His earthly ministry. Here are just a few examples (*italics mine*).

Now in the days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said...

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. (Acts 6:1–2, 7)

But Paul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord . . .” (Acts 9:1)

For some days he [Paul] was with the disciples at Damascus. (Acts 9:19)

Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. (Acts 9:36)

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Acts 11:26)

So the disciples determined, everyone accordingly to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. (Acts 11:29)

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:19–22)

Clearly the people referred to as disciples in these passages are not a special highly committed type of Christian; they are ordinary believers. Summarizing, Michael Wilkins says,

*Throughout the book of Acts, disciples is a title for those who have placed their faith in Jesus and are now followers of Jesus, converts. That the term disciple was still used makes it clear that continuity is maintained between those who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry and those of the post-resurrection church.*¹⁹



This direct connection with Jesus and His first disciples helps define our identity and illuminates the meaning and path of discipleship for those in every generation who seek to follow Jesus.²⁰

Conclusions

In light of this study of the words *Christian* and *disciple* what conclusions can we draw? Does *Christian* designate a different category of believer from *disciple*? Is it a term for the great mass of believers, for whom a lower standard of commitment to Jesus is acceptable, in contrast to *disciples*, from whom an optional, higher standard is required? The definitions of each word and their use in the New Testament do not give us that option. It is clear that these words are synonyms. Wilkins sums up:

*Disciple is the primary term used in the gospels to refer to Jesus' followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brother/sisters, those of the way, or saints, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual's relationship with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 230 times in the gospels . . . and 28 times in Acts.*²¹

Space limitations have confined our study to the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, however, John's Gospel also has much to teach on discipleship. And so do the Epistles, where the word *disciple* is not used but the concept is present and addressed in different language. For more, see *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, edited by Richard Longenecker (Eerdmans).

I would like to conclude with two implications of what I have been saying. The first is that *we need to recover our true identity as disciples of Jesus Christ*. This requires careful and prayerful study of what the Gospels and Acts reveal about disciples and discipleship and discovering for ourselves that *Christian*, *believer*, and *disciple* are synonymous—and that a Christian is called to live a life of wholehearted discipleship to Jesus. Tragically many people in churches today believe themselves to

be Christians but are not living as disciples of Jesus. In some cases, this is because they are Christians in name only and have not yet come to saving faith. In other cases, they are true Christians but do not understand what the Bible teaches about their identity as disciples. In either case, the answer is for a person to examine his or her heart and life in light of the gospel message and the call to discipleship and respond accordingly. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to do this when he said, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5).

What does this self-examination involve? Briefly, if Jesus Christ is in you (by the Spirit), there will be signs of new life, for “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). This new life is the fruit of faith in God and trust in Jesus, who has paid the penalty for your sins. And it has ongoing effects. A growing love for God and other people should be present, along with power to live in newness of life. You should also experience the Holy Spirit convicting you when you sin, urging you to live out grateful and joyful obedience to Christ and prompting you to reach out to the lost.

The Sermon on the Mount is a rich place to begin exploring this life of discipleship.²² As you discover more of what is involved in being a faithful disciple, you may be surprised at what it entails, but do not become discouraged or overwhelmed. Remind yourself that Jesus is loving, gracious, and patient toward you, just as He was with the twelve, who often failed to understand and respond properly to what He was teaching them. He will help you, just as He helped them. He will also use you, just as He used them. When you fail, ask His forgiveness and commit yourself to making every effort to do better next time. And pray daily, and throughout the day, for the Holy Spirit’s leading, empowerment, and joy. To help solidify and reinforce your true identity, consider referring to yourself not as a Christian but as a disciple of Jesus. (This seems clearer and more winsome than the phrase *Christ-follower*, which is a somewhat awkward use of English.)

A second implication is that as disciples of Jesus, *we need to resume our mission of making disciples for Jesus*. The Great Commission was not given to the twelve only, but through them to all believers. It was a simple but brilliant idea. They were to reproduce themselves by doing with others what Jesus had done with them. Then *their* disciples were to go out and do the same with others. In that way, Christ’s kingdom would expand from generation to generation until He returns.

To make a disciple, you must be a disciple. This means that you have repented, believed the gospel, been baptized, and are in a church where you are in the (lifelong) process of learning to understand and obey all that Jesus taught the twelve (Matt. 28:19).²³

Ideally, you have been in a discipling relationship in the past or are in one now. It is probably wisest to start your discipling ministry with someone who is already a believer and wants to become a stronger and more faithful disciple.²⁴ However, at some point, you will want to reach out to those who do not know Christ to help them come to salvation. To do so, prepare yourself by learning what the gospel message consists of and how to share it in a wise, winsome, and grace-filled way. There are many good resources for this.²⁵ Remember that in seeking to reach nonbelievers, you’ll want to keep the focus on Jesus Christ, who He is, what He did on the cross, and the forgiveness and new life He offers to those who want it. Communicate in language free of theological terms and religious jargon; for example, the words *Christian* and *Christianity* are so laden with baggage (the periodic massacre of Jews, the Crusades, Inquisition, Thirty-Years’ War, Holocaust, televangelist scandals, pedophile priests, etc.) that they can easily divert attention from Jesus and the gospel to distracting objections and confusing, controversial issues. Those who actively share the gospel periodically run into problems with the word *Christian*. As early as 1983, John Stott said, “Because of its common misuse, we could profitably dispense with it.”²⁶ Whether you use the word *Christian* or not, the main point is to keep the focus on Jesus: who He was, what He did, and why it matters.

As you recover your identity as a disciple of Jesus and resume your mission of helping others become His disciples, you will become increasingly fruitful and joyful. As pastors catch this vision and lead their churches in it, they will become deeply satisfied as they see lives being transformed and church growth coming from conversions, not just transfers from other churches. And the light of Christ will burn brightly once again in our land. ■

Christ says ‘Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.

C.S. Lewis

Notes:

1. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ed., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 477–78.
2. G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, and G.W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 534.
3. W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89.
4. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 242, n. 26, drawing on an essay by E.J. Bickerman in *Harvard Theological Review*.
5. John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 205.
6. *Ibid.*, 205.
7. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 548.
8. Acts 11:19–21.
9. James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 288; see also R.K. Harrison, ed. *Major Cities of the Biblical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 15.
10. Scripture quotations in this article are from the English Standard Version.
11. Bauer, Arndt, Gingerich, s.v. *mathetes*.
12. For the history, see Michael Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Mathew’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995). Also see *Following the Master* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 71–94.
13. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, XX.]
14. William L. Kynes, PhD, New Testament scholar, pastor, and currently moderator of the Evangelical Free Church of America, in private correspondence with author.
15. Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Matthew 14-28, v.2 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1995), 886; See also, Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 951
16. Darrell Bock, *A Theology of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 323.
17. *Ibid.*, 323–30.
18. *Ibid.*, 323–24.
19. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 249.
20. *Ibid.* See also Richard Longenecker, ed., *Studies in Hermeneutics, Christology and Discipleship* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 248, 261–61.
21. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 40.
22. See John Stott’s commentary, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (InterVarsity Press). One of the best books of all time is Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans).
23. Helpful resources to grow in your own understanding discipleship include Michael Wilkins, *In His Image* (NavPress) and Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (InterVarsity). You should read at least these two books before discipling someone.
24. An excellent resource guide is the workbook by Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials* (InterVarsity). A great follow-up study is his *The Essential Commandment* (InterVarsity).
25. Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism* (Kregel). A very helpful little booklet to give people is *Two Ways to Live* (Matthias Media).
26. John R.W. Stott, “*In Christ*,” *The Meaning and Implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. Address to the Leadership Luncheon, National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, DC, 1983.

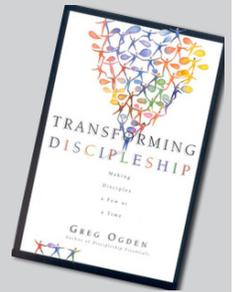


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RECOMMENDED READING

Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time, by Greg Ogden, IVP Books

In *Transforming Discipleship* Greg Ogden introduces his vision for discipleship, emphasizing that solutions will not be found in large-scale, finely-tuned, resource-heavy programs. Instead, Ogden recovers Jesus' method of accomplishing life change by investing in just a few people at a time. And he shows how discipleship can become a self-replicating process with ongoing impact from generation to generation. Biblical, practical and tremendously effective, *Transforming Discipleship* provides the insights and philosophy of ministry behind Ogden's earlier work, *Discipleship Essentials*. Together, these ground-breaking books have the potential to transform how your church transforms the lives of its people.



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