

WHO IS A CHRISTIAN?

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AC 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

AC 11:22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.²³ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

AC 11:25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

The Early Church had just emerged from Judaism, and so, we find the conflict among them as to who could belong to their fellowship. Many of the Jewish Christians did not believe that anyone who was a Gentile could be saved. God's grace, they believed, was for Jews only. That argument was strongly made by some who later became quite aggressive in trying to make sure that anyone who was a Christian should become first a Jewish proselyte by being circumcised and only then by becoming a disciple, or, member of "the Way." Paul devotes the entire book of Galatians refuting that dangerous heresy.

The problem would have been much greater for the Apostle Paul had not Peter and others first encountered it and decided that God's Spirit was Himself the final arbiter of who could or could not be a member of the group of Nazarenes, as they were also called.

After Simon Peter made his defense of going into a Gentile household and preaching to Cornelius, Luke tells us of the revival that was going on as a result of the earlier persecutions. The church was scattered and the people preached as they went. In fact, the disciples had traveled as far as the western coast to Phoenicia, and beyond to the Island of Cyprus, and even to Syria and an important Syrian city, Antioch. Because of its strategic location and the revival going on there, the Church sent Barnabas to be the pastor of the Antioch congregation. The revival continued under Barnabas, but this wise leader knew that he needed the help of a man called Saul. So he went to Tarsus, not far from Antioch, and brought Saul to the work. Then we find this classic statement: "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

The term 'Christian' was probably given to Christians by their enemies, but has been used since to describe us. But what is a Christian? Or better still, Who is a Christian? That is the question I want to ask, and hope that I can answer it in this sermon, knowing full well that the question will not be fully resolved until Jesus returns. Then all who are truly Christian will be gathered to Him.

In asking who is a Christian it is necessary to state the negative and remind you of **THOSE THAT ARE NOT CHRISTIANS**. We know that a Christian is not just a **GOOD PERSON**. Goodness is one of those terms that is a value term. To say good is related to my value of what is good, just as what is beautiful or what is true. These terms cannot have universal meaning, but the meaning our values give to them. The worst person in the world may be good to me and therefore, if I didn't know how bad he had been to others, I might call him 'good.' But to give you a better example, Cornelius was by all we know from Scripture was a 'good' man. But he wasn't a Christian. He was close, but not there until Simon Peter preached the Gospel to him and his group and then the Spirit of God came upon the little group and they became Christians. He was a 'God-fearer.' He was not a Christian.

Further a Christian is not a **RELIGIOUS PERSON**. The Romans and the Jews that crucified Jesus were 'religious.' In fact it is very difficult not to find a religious person wherever you look, dressed in his own particular suit of beliefs. Actually, whether one admits it or not, when one is an atheist he is most religious. Aggressive atheists are more religious than most Christians in the defense and propagation of their beliefs. I am teaching Comparative Religions this semester and am enjoying looking again at the belief systems of the major religions of the world. And certainly one would not call Hindus or Buddhists or Muslim by the term Christian. A religious person is just that, a religious person, whether Jew or Greek, bond or free.

Again, a Christian **IS NOT A CHURCH MEMBER**. The members of the Jerusalem Church were indeed Christians, but they suspected that the Gentiles could never be saved. They did not realize one truth in particular, that even some members of their own group were not truly Christians, even if they were called that. Some of them were not 'true believers.' Some of them had never met Jesus. Let me illustrate: Recently our Director of Missions made a call to one of our 3-Forks Association churches to be a part of Prayer Walking and Revival to take place later this fall and in the spring. That pastor said to him, "All the people in my area are already 'saved' so I don't see any need to be a part of that." That pastor didn't realize that members of his own church were probably not all Christians. He might have thought they were but most churches have lost people on their membership roles. Certainly all the people of the area were not Christians!

Who is a Christian? "They were called Christians first in Antioch." But, **WHO IS A CHRISTIAN?** Let me try to answer that for you: **A CHRISTIAN IS FIRST OF ALL, ONE WHO WAS LOST, BUT NOW FOUND**. During our conference at Louisville this weekend, our instructor kept talking about man being lost, and referred primarily to **HELL**. While I believe that is the final destination of the lost, I believe

lostness has terrible implications for the living also. The Lost person has no direction for his life. He may put many things as goals and aims and reach all these aims. But he is still lost. The lostness of life is a terrible thing. The Bible says, “The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt; there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.” This lack of relationship to God, this alienation, this lostness causes all the real problems of our society today. We need God, but first of all, we need Peace with God. The Bible again tells us, “Your sins have separated between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid his face from you that He will not hear.” This separation from God is the truth of our lostness.

The Christian is a person who has found God, or rather has been found of God. Jesus clearly said, “I have come to seek and to save that which was lost.” A group of us were asked recently, “What is worse than being lost.” Then the person who asked that question answered it himself: “It is being lost and no one trying to find you.” The Christian has been found of Christ. God sent His only begotten Son to earth to find us. That is why Jesus came—to seek and to find us. The Christian is one who can sing the song *Amazing Grace* and know that the statement is true of him, “I once was lost, but now I’m found...” Psalm 23.

The Christian can also affirm the next part of that stanza, “Was blind but now I see.” Whether the Christian is a member of a church or not a church member, that person still knows that something wonderful happened to him when Jesus found him. CHRIST GAVE HIM LIGHT IN HIS DARKNESS. For many centuries men have sought for TRUTH. They have sought it with the mind, with the heart, with the will, in religion, out of religion, in philosophy, in science, in history, and so ad infinitum. But they have not found the truth in all these things. Yes, they have found glimpses of truth, but only glimpses. They have seen flashes in the mirrors of truth into which they have gazed. But they have seen no real truth in all that. They are like the man Jesus healed of blindness. Their eyes are sealed with darkness. Only the Son of God can give them the sight for which they long. They need to cry out by the roadside like the blind man of Scripture, “Son of David have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me.”

Saul sat around in his darkness for several days before God sent Ananias to him to say, “Brother Saul, Jesus sent me to give you sight and to lay hands on you to receive the Holy Spirit.” Like Paul, we were blind to the truth of God until Jesus gave us light. And now we see! How can one healed of blindness tell blind men what it is to have sight? It is not easy, but we who are Christians have that as our goal, to tell the blind world about a living Savior who can give them sight. Their response is. “What is sight?” We can only say, “Come and see!” I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see!

That the Christian can affirm. The Christian also is one who WAS ONCE BORN, BUT HAS BEEN REBORN. We were all born in the flesh. We live our lives like all other human beings to some degree. However, we live in different places with different cultures and different religions and different views about life. The *Bible* says that the years of our life are 3 score years and 10, but it also says we may live more by the grace of God. The point is we soon get tired of the grind of eating and drinking, working and

sleeping, getting up and down, and so we die. Is that all there is to life? Is this life in the flesh all that exists? Maybe we turn to religion, or perhaps to philosophy, but these things do not really help. We are still flesh born and must die in the same way.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” Human beings are born in the flesh and cannot by the flesh be called Christians. But Jesus told Nicodemus about an alternative way—“You must be born again.” That experience happened to the Early Christians. They were born again, and that word means ‘born from above.’ When the Spirit of God came down upon these Gentiles they were born again, born from above. The Christian is the person who was once born in the flesh, but born again in the Spirit of God, born from above. Whatever our earthly position or circumstance, the only way we can rise above our flesh nature is to have God come down into our humanity and give us eternal life, or the life of the Spirit of God. God alone can do that. No man can give us a religion that creates a new life within us. No religion can give rebirth whatever that religion teaches. Buddhism and Hinduism both can give a different consciousness to the human being who follows them, but they cannot give a different, a new birth. Only Christ can give that as He gives us the Holy Spirit to live within us. A Christian is one upon whom the Holy Spirit has come as he has given himself to Jesus.

Last of all the Christian is one who WAS ONCE DEAD IN SIN AND IS NOW DEAD TO SIN. Without Christ we are dead in sin. We have no idea who God is and no idea what life is all about, for it is all about God. Lazarus is a parable of our dead selves lying in that cold tomb, dead in our sins. Only the voice of Jesus can call loud enough to bring us back to life and to call us from that tomb.^{RO 6:11} In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.¹³ Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

We were dead in sin, now we are dead to sin. That makes us Christians. Because we have believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because we count Him as our Savior and our Lord, we have been resurrected from the dead ourselves and become Christians. Paul writes again, in Romans 8:¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you

You see, we were indeed once dead in sin, but now we are dead to sin. That does not mean of course that we Christians never sin. We are still in the flesh. But having been born again, we are in the Eternal Holy Spirit. Sometimes, however, the flesh dominates the Spirit in the warfare between the two. But that is a fleeting thing. Once the Holy Spirit is within us he will not allow us to go on with our sinning without

experiencing the consequences. He whips us with a spiritual whipping. He brings us back to God.

I say all that to say this, "They were first called Christians at Antioch." Who is the Christian? Are you a Christian? You can be, no matter who you are. I love this poem of a life touched by the Master:

The Touch of the Master's Hand

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"
"A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three..." But no,
From the room, far back, a grey-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet,
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,
And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand.
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:
"The touch of the Master's hand."
And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,

A game -- and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

-- *Myra Brooks Welch*