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Who Is A Christian?

by Bryan Hodge

Many equate living by a high moral standard as being Christian. Is this the definition of how the Bible uses the term “Christian”? I have met Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, Jews, and even Atheists who live by a high moral standard. Bertrand Russel once said, “If you mean by a Christian a man who loves his neighbor, who has wide sympathy with suffering, and who ardently desires a world free from cruelties and abominations ... certainly you will be justified in calling me a Christian” (What is Agnosticism, p. 289). Yet, he wrote a famous book entitled “Why I Am Not a Christian.”

Others equate being a churchgoer with being a Christian. Is this the definition of how the Bible uses the term “Christian”? What about the one who sits in a pew, but is there only because of a parent or spouse? Is such a one a Christian? What about the one who lives an openly immoral life during the week, but who is in the pew every Sunday? Is such a one a Christian?

Some equate one who mentally believes in Jesus as a Christian, whether or not he is baptized, or obeys in any way the teachings of Christ. Is such a one a Christian? Is this how the Bible uses the term? John 12:42-43, “Even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.” Is it possible for one to be like this today, and still be a Christian according to the Bible?

It seems to me that the Bible uses the term “Christian” in two senses. Let us notice ...

First Sense

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). Some have suggested that the name is of pagan origin. The I.S.B.E. reads, “The word must have been coined by the heathen population of Antioch ...” (vol., 1, p. 622). Such is a mistake. Read Isa. 62:1-2. Watch the order: (1) Salvation/righteousness would go forth from Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8; 11:19). (2) The Gentiles would see it (cf. Acts 11:13-14, 18). Note: The term “see” sometimes carries the idea of “experience” (cf. Lk. 9:27; Ex. 14:13). (3) A new name would be given by God Himself (cf. Acts 11:18, 26). Note: The term “called” (chrematizo) in Acts 11:26, also rendered “warned”, and “admonished” is used in the N.T. exclusively of being warned or admonished or called of God (cf. Acts 10:22; 11:26; Mt. 2:12, 22; Lk. 2:26; Rom 7:3; Heb. 8:5; 11:7; 12:25). This is a divinely given name!

Now notice—the disciples were called Christians. Whom does the Great Commission onward define as a disciple? Read Matthew 28:18-20. Both baptizing and teaching are descriptive of how a

disciple is made. The order is not specified, both are simply conditions of one becoming a disciple. Both are present participles. “The present participle indicates action which is contemporaneous with the action of the main verb” (Ray Summers, Essentials of New Testament Greek, p. 90). An illustration if I were to say, “The church showed hospitality to the hurricane victims feeding, clothing, and providing shelter,” or “They serviced my car airing up the tires and changing the oil, and topping off the fluids”, I am implying no order. I am simply saying this is how hospitality was showed, or this is how they serviced my car. We know from elsewhere in scripture that teaching occurs both before and after one is baptized. Do not miss the point. The point I am making is that one cannot be a Christian without being properly baptized and taught.

Another approach—the original language is helpful. The suffix “ianos” (as in christianos) was used in two senses. One sense meant “belonging to” (I.S.B.E., Thayer, Vine’s). When one is properly baptized, he is baptized lit. “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19 cf. Acts 19:5-6). Ed Wharton “eis to onoma, ‘in the name of,’ or more correctly, ‘into the name of’ does not mean that we are baptized ‘at the command of’ or ‘on the authority of’ [as in Acts 2:38 when the phrase is different, (epi to onomati)] ... ‘into the name’ was a common phrase for transference of ownership” (The Church of Christ, pp. 46-47). Arndt-Gingrich “through baptism ... the one baptized becomes the possession of and comes under the protection of the one whose name he bears” (p. 572).

Second Sense

As before stated, the original suffix “ianos” (as in christianos) was used in two senses. One sense meant “a follower” (Thayer), “an adherent” (I.S.B.E.). Remember that a Christian is a disciple (Acts 11:26). A disciple is “a learner ... one who follows one’s teaching ... a disciple was not only a pupil, but an adherent, hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher” (Vine’s). The word “disciple” was sometimes used in secular Greek for an “apprentice” (TDNT). Therefore, a true Christian has not only been properly baptized, but follows the teachings of Christ. Consider 1 Peter 4:15-16, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” Observe that it is possible for one to be a Christian in the sense of being baptized into Christ (this epistle was written to such people), and yet have behavior which is not Christian, that is, which is not in keeping with truly following him.

King Agrippa once said, “You almost persuaded me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). May we each be persuaded to be a Christian in both senses of the word: (1) uniquely belonging to Him through baptism; (2) truly following Him, not just in the initial plan of salvation, but also in all of life.