

Call to Obedience #332
 PO Box 299 Kokomo, IN 46903 USA
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If any man serve me, Let him follow me...—John 12:26

THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN, THEN AND NOW

By Pastor Reimar A. C. Schultze

In this article I shall attempt to define the word *Christian*. As you know, there are things indefinable and things definable. For example, you cannot define God. You cannot define anything that has no end to it. Since we cannot find or gather up the ends of God, He remains indefinable. If a million books were written about Him by the most brilliant scholars, we still could not define our God. The Bible says, “*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable*” (Psa. 145:3). And “*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!*” (Rom. 11:33).

As God is without measure, so is His love. In Ephesians, Paul comforts the saints in times of tribulation, when doubts can easily settle in, by saying, “*That ye.... may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge*” (Eph. 3:18, 19). God is beyond knowledge, and His love is beyond knowledge.

Many Israelites thought they knew what divine love was. But when Jesus died on the cross for them they learned it was much bigger than they ever thought. Then, when they just got settled into that new concept of Calvary Love, they learned about Pentecostal Love, “*the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit*” (Rom. 5:5). And this ever-exploding experience of God’s love goes on and on in the heart of every saint into eternity.

Well, so much for things *indefinable*. There are also things *definable*. Were it not so, we would all perish in confusion. We must have some tracks in our lives that are firmly laid down. We need some of “*this is the way of the Lord, walk ye in it*” (Isa. 30:21). We need some labels that adequately and faithfully describe a product.

So, what does the word *Christian* mean to you? Here are some answers you might find in the world. Multiplied millions believe a Christian is one who is baptized. Some believe it is infant baptism that makes one a Christian; others insist it must be an adult baptism or an adult immersion accompanied by a profession of faith

Others believe it is the Golden Rule. A preacher friend of mine sat next to an astrologer in an aircraft. The astrologer spoke for millions of people when he said, “I suppose all of Christianity can be boiled down to this, the Golden Rule - “*whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.*” (Mat. 7:12). My friend wisely responded, “If that were so, then astrology could be reduced to ‘Twinkle, twinkle little

star, How I wonder what you are.”

There are millions who believe that church membership makes you a Christian. It has to be *their* church membership of course. Other millions believe that a Christian is one who believes in Christ. (Since the devil also believes in Christ, that would make him a Christian too, wouldn't it? Except that the devil would be a trembling Christian - see James 2:19). Still others believe that a Christian is one who is morally upright, who keeps the Ten Commandments.

Enough of this. If all these beliefs were correct, these millions in the world would be Christians, but our Lord said few would find His way. *“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it”* (Mat. 7:13,14). It is obvious that the word *Christian* has become such a muddled, vague and ambiguous word that it needs redefining.

So then, who is a *Christian*? The primordial meaning was to identify a persecuted group. *“And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch”* (Acts 11:26). This persecution began right after Stephen was murdered and before James, the first apostle, was beheaded. The first Christians scattered to Antioch, a large prosperous city in Syria. It was that quickly, perhaps mere months after Pentecost, that unbelievers tagged the disciples as *Christians*, as followers of Plato were earlier dubbed *Platonists*. So, the name *Christian* came from pagans observing that these believers were such ardent followers of Christ that they were willing to follow Him even to the death. And the Christians became the most fanatical and radical sectarian group of the time.

This, then, raises the question, **why were the early Christians willing to follow Jesus to persecution and death?** The answer is that Jesus demanded it. From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, His key call was, *“Follow Me.”* And it must be understood that this call to follow Him never meant anything less than for His followers to give up their schedules, their plans, their ideas and arrangements, to be with Him and to do His will 24 hours a day. This following was never intended to be a part-time job. It was intended that every moment was to be entirely surrendered to Christ. *“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:26, 27).

The Church was born on Pentecost, but Christianity began the day after John the Baptist declared Jesus to be the Son of God. John writes that on the ‘next day’ after this declaration (John 1:35), Andrew and John began to follow Jesus. Then Andrew told Peter, and Peter began to follow Jesus. Then the next day Jesus found Philip, and said to him, *‘Follow me’* (verse 43). It continued, man after man, town after town, Jesus calling men to follow Him. As you cannot have Christianity without Christ, neither can you have Christianity without followers. You cannot have a Kingdom unless you have both a King and His followers willing to go to the death

Jesus would not allow anything to stand between Him and His disciples. They had to be all for Him or they were not for Him at all. Just one thing you're not willing to give up will disqualify you from being a follower of Jesus. This was the early perception of what it meant to be a *Christian*. It was understood by all to be that way. Jesus, in fact, even told Peter that he would die as his Lord died (John 21:18). When Peter and John were persecuted right after Pentecost and some disciples were killed, they understood that. It was part of the package.

Forsaking all to follow Jesus even to death became the hallmark of what Christians were all about. Once this uncompromising stand was clearly understood in Rome, Rome made it clear that it would not tolerate such competition to Caesar. Hence it initiated 10 major persecutions in the first three centuries. Thousands of Christians shed their blood for Jesus during this time and tens of thousands were driven out of their homes. Oh my friend, Jesus is not interested in numbers, He's interested in followers.

And so, when the unbelievers in Antioch saw how the believers behaved, they knew that Christians were followers of Jesus, even to martyrdom. So, Jesus was not interested in His believers joining His club. He had no club. He had no church membership from which people could go to Heaven. The only way people can go to Heaven is for them to follow Jesus, as I have stated, and to realize that it is all about Him and not about them. It was about His agenda and not theirs. Any church that teaches that people can be Christians by membership, by rituals, or by any religious experience without following Jesus is deceiving her people and damning them to a place where *the fire is not quenched and the worm dieth not*. The original definition of a *Christian* is "a follower of Jesus unto the death." People at Antioch understood that, now do **you** understand it as well?

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