

# God's Definition of a Christian

by Ron Daly

The name Christian is used only three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Pet. 4:16). In the first century, when the apostles lived, and the Holy Spirit worked through them in order to reveal religious truth (Jn. 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:13), the word Christian never was used with God's approval to describe the following: (1) a member of the sects of the Jews who had not obeyed the gospel of Christ, (2) denominational churches, (3) organizations built by men for charitable purposes, (4) religious thought, philosophy, or literature such as papers, books, tracts, etc., (5) countries or nations which claimed to be believers in and followers of God, or (6) the morally upright who had not submitted to the authority of Christ.

## Who Were Called Christians?

According to Acts 11:26, ". . . the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." The disciples were called Christians. Not the organizations which the disciples formed, or of which they were members, but the disciples themselves were called Christians. A disciple is a learner, one who is taught. According to the context of Acts 11, these disciples were ones "in the assembly" taught by Barnabas and Saul (Paul). So, "the disciples who were called Christians" were in the church! They were not those who were out of the church, nor were they prospective members of the church; they were in it. According to 1 Peter 4:16, those commanded by the Spirit through the apostle to suffer "as a Christian" were .men," i.e., people, such as could be identified as "let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name." Those whom he commanded to "glorify God in this name" are identified in the general context as ones who were "the elect," "sojourners of the dispersion," that "according to God's great mercy were begotten unto a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:1-3). These were people who had "been begotten again . . . through the word of God" when they were saved by the blood of Christ when they were baptized (1 Pet. 1:22-25; 3:21).

## What Characterized These People Called Christians?

The context of 1 Peter 4:1ff gives us a beautiful portrait of those who were Christians. They ceased living in the flesh "to the lusts of men." The old man of sin had been "put to death"; immorality, passion, covetousness, evil desire, idolatry, revellings, winebibbings, and carousings (vv. 1-3; Col. 3:1-11). They knew that the "works of the flesh" bring ruin (Gal. 5:19-21).

They lived according "to the will of God." Whatever God decreed they did; the things he forbade they avoided. God's will must always take precedence over man's will, for God's counsel is never wrong. The expression "the will of God" (v.2) is antithetical to

"the desire of the Gentiles" (v. 3). It was because of their love for God and his will that they did not "run with the Gentiles in the same excess of riot" (v. 4). Christians knew that men "must give account to him that is ready to judge the living and the dead" (v. 5).

They were also "fervent in love" (v. 8). Insincerity and hypocrisy were positively forbidden. They were to be genuine. And, this love was to be more than just genuine, it was to be intense. This strenuous love that they exercised would "cover a multitude of sins" because it would always be willing to forgive, and would not retaliate. As a matter of fact, this kind of love enable them to practice "hospitality without murmuring" (v. 9). They realized that what they possessed was not really their own, but it was put in their trust in order that they could use material goods for the sake of the brethren in the kingdom of God. This attitude would forbid any complaining.

Those whom Peter called Christians were to "speak as the oracles of God" and "minister according to the strength which God supplies" (v. 11). They would glorify God and his word, and would do and say nothing which was not the will of God, or according to his message. In doing this, they would endure the "fiery trials among them," for they would see them as opportunities to be "proved" (v. 12). God's word would give them the strength to endure all things. They would remember the sufferings of Christ, and when "reproached for the name of Christ, they would rejoice" (vv. 13-14). On the other hand, Christians should never suffer as "murderers, thieves, evil-doers, or as meddlers in other men's matters" (v. 15). To do so, should make them ashamed, but to suffer as a Christian brings no shame, but it glorifies God. The time had come for "judgment to begin at the house of God." The righteous would be saved through much difficulty, but the sinners and the ungodly could not stand. Only the Christians "suffer according to the will of God" and may "commit their souls in well-doing unto a faithful Creator (v. 19). What consolation to those who suffer for the sake of righteousness. Just to know that no matter what besets us, God is trustworthy.

## How Do Men Become Christians?

One becomes a Christian by submitting to God in faithful obedience to his Son's gospel, through faith (Rom. 1:17; Acts 15:7), repentance (Acts 2:38; 17:30), confession of the Lord (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:10), and immersion into his name for the remission of sins (Mk. 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).

So, what is God's definition of a Christian? A Christian is one who has learned the teaching of God's Son, has obeyed it from the heart, and continues to the best of his ability to walk in Christ's commandments, giving God all the glory for the good he does by God's mercy and grace.