

## What Is A Christian?

Text: Acts 11:19-26

Suggested Hymns:

258, 344, 366, 218, 231

- 1) What is a Christian?
- 2) A Christian is a work of God
- 3) A Christian is a person who clings to God
- 4) A Christian is a person who lives for Christ

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Acts 11:19-26, <sup>19</sup> *Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.* <sup>20</sup> *But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.* <sup>21</sup> *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*

<sup>22</sup> *Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.* <sup>23</sup> *When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.* <sup>24</sup> *For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.* <sup>25</sup> *Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.* <sup>26</sup> *And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Several years ago an interesting court case took place when a will was admitted to Probate Court. The deceased had left a rather large sum of money, which was to be used for purposes of advancing the Christian faith. The will was contested on the grounds that it was impossible to define the meaning of the word "Christian." It was contended that the great number of denominations which claimed to be Christian indicated by their many divisions that it was

virtually impossible to make a clear statement in answer to the question *What Is a Christian?* May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider this question.

### **1. What is a Christian?**

We certainly must admit that the word “Christian” is used loosely in many quarters. To many, “Christian” has taken on the meaning of “religious.” As a result anyone who holds to some religious principles which have their basis in Scripture is classified as “Christian.” Others become so broad in their definition that every Australian is a “Christian,” on the grounds that our country is or was classified as a “Christian” nation.

Let us therefore search the Scriptures and permit God to answer the question for us. The word “Christian” is used only three times in the New Testament. The first occasion is that described in our text. The second instance occurs when St. Paul confessed his faith before King Agrippa and received the distressing comment in Acts 26:28, <sup>28</sup> *Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”* The last instance occurs in St. Peter’s First Epistle, He writes, *Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.*<sup>1</sup>

Today we have chosen to study the people who “were called Christians first in Antioch.” What were they like? Why did their enemies call them “Christians”? How does God describe these people? What are their marks of identification?

It was an amazing group of people at Antioch that earned the distinction of being called Christians for the first time. They had fled to Antioch as a result of the persecution that struck the mother church at Jerusalem at the time of the death of the first martyr, Stephen.

So unique were they that word reached the mother church, and Barnabas was sent to visit them and discover first-hand what made them so distinctive. Barnabas came, he saw, and was glad.

### **2. A Christian Is A Work Of God**

In the first place, Barnabas saw *“the grace of God”* in the congregation at Antioch. God had lavished His great undeserved love upon these people. In His grace He had provided them a Saviour in His Son, and by His Holy Spirit He had

brought them to faith and given them all the blessings won by Christ for all sinners.

They *“turned to the Lord”* and believed in Him. God had wrought a mighty wonder in their hearts, turning them away from a life of sin and unbelief to faith in the Saviour, in whom they received forgiveness of sin, eternal life and salvation.

This account gives us the first clue as to God’s own definition of a Christian. A Christian is a work of God. St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, *“For we are His workmanship.* In His marvellous grace God takes a person who is a born enemy of God, a lover of that which displeases God, a natural unbeliever, and changes Him into a *“new creature in Christ.”*<sup>2</sup>

This change God achieves by His grace through the converting work of the Holy Spirit. God does not merely put a new cloak on a man but He also puts a new man in the cloak. He changes him and makes him a partaker of everything that Jesus won for every sinner. He forgives his every sin, and He gives him a new spirit. He changes his outlook on life and holds out to him the certain crown of eternal glory. A Christian is a work of God’s grace.

### **3. A Christian Is A Person Who Clings To Christ**

This grace of God resulted in a strong, steadfast faith in Christ in the hearts of the people at Antioch. When Barnabas came to them and saw what God had done to and for these people, he *encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.* Faith joined them to Christ, and faith held them to Christ. Being justified by faith, they had peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In their hearts was one recurring melody:<sup>3</sup>

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress,  
Wherein before my God I’ll stand  
When I shall reach the heav’nly land.*

They believed that Jesus was wounded for their transgressions, bruised for their iniquities, and that with His stripes they were healed.

A Christian is a person whom God has turned to Christ and who clings to Christ as his only Hope of forgiveness and peace with God. He does not trust in his good deeds, for he understands that in God's eyes his *"righteousnesses are as filthy rags."*<sup>4</sup> Therefore he says instead,<sup>5</sup>

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;  
No merit of my own I claim,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name:  
*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

#### 4. A Christian Is A Person Who Lives For Christ

There was something beautiful about the lives of these people in Antioch. Barnabas saw it as soon as he came there and served them as a minister of the Gospel. When the text says that He saw the grace of God at work in the lives of these people, it proceeds to indicate in what ways God's love showed itself in their conduct.

St. Paul reminds us that God makes people Christians for a purpose. He says, *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."*<sup>6</sup> It is God's purpose when He brings us to faith in Christ that we live like *"little Christs."* When He makes us *"new creatures in Christ,"* He expects us to live a life different from the one lived by a person who is not a Christian.

The people at Antioch were different. Their characters were changed. Their aims in life were elevated. Their conduct toward one another and their fellow man was distinctive. What they said and did indicated that their faith in Christ was a living, moving, active, and compelling force in their lives.

They exemplified St. Paul's confession of faith written in Galatians 2:20, <sup>20</sup> *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. These Christians believed that Christ died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."*<sup>7</sup>

This sweet incense of the Christian life rose as a perfume into the presence of God. They showed in many ways that *“to you who believe, Christ is precious.”*<sup>8</sup>

In the first place, these Christians at Antioch showed a real love for God’s Word. They exemplified the word of the Psalmist, ***LORD, I have loved the habitation of Your house, And the place where Your glory dwells.***<sup>9</sup> When Barnabas left for Tarsus to find St. Paul and bring him to this congregation, we read in our text that *when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people.*

Furthermore, they received God’s ministers gladly. They honoured Barnabas and St. Paul as men sent from God and *“esteemed them very highly in love for their work’s sake.”*<sup>10</sup> Christ was reflected in their high regard for God’s ministers, for it was Christ who said of His ministers, in Luke 10:16, *“He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.”*

This is surely a distinguishing feature of the Christian that he regards the ministers of the Word as servants of Christ and under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd. The Christian receives the instruction of his pastor gladly, because he counts his spiritual shepherd as a blessing from his Saviour.

Another striking feature of this congregation at Antioch was their outstanding zeal for mission work. The persecution they endured because of their faith in Christ did not dampen their missionary zeal. They spoke of their faith as a matter of course. They rejoiced in their Saviour Friend. *“They believed and therefore spoke.”*

They saw people all around them who needed Christ, and that was enough. They obeyed the promptings of the Gospel in their own hearts and laid the foundations of the first Gentile church. They found it as natural to be missionaries, as tears are to sorrow, or smiles to happiness. Their feeling was like that of Jeremiah, who said, *“His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not.”*<sup>11</sup>

Christians are characterised by our Lord as people who privately and jointly with other Christians pursue mission work with a natural spontaneity and zeal. In regard to worldly treasures we are tempted instinctively to keep the treasure to

ourselves. But when God in His grace gives a man the treasure of His salvation in Christ, there is a longing to share this treasure with all people.

These Christians at Antioch were not church officials or trained ministers. Neither did they have any specific commission or program laid out to them by the church at Jerusalem. But they had Christ and all His blessings, and so mission work lay close to their heart. They were bound together in mission work because they were bound together by a common bond of faith in Christ.

Christians have always been mission-minded. Jesus who came to seek and to save the lost has placed His imprint on His followers. Ever since then there have been Christians. There have been joint mission endeavours also. It is impossible for a person who has Christ in his heart to abstain from private and joint mission activity.

The person who claims to be a Christian but will not join with his fellow Christians in mission work throughout the world is living in open rebellion against Christ who commanded him, *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”*<sup>12</sup>

The Christians at Antioch exemplify another Christian virtue. They were ready to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. These people knew the real cost of following after Christ. Their lives were not sheltered from open persecution.

On the contrary, “Persecution drove the members of the Church apart, and, as a matter of course, wherever they went they took their faith with them, and, as a matter of course, spoke about it. The coals were scattered from the hearth in Jerusalem by the armed heel of violence. That did not put the fire out, but only spread it, for wherever they were flung they kindled a blaze.

These men had no special injunction ‘to preach the Lord Jesus.’ They do not seem to have adopted this line of action deliberately, or of set purpose. ‘They believed, and therefore spoke.’ A spontaneous impulse, and nothing more, leads them on. They find themselves rejoicing in a great Saviour-Friend. They see all around them men who need Him, and that is enough. They obey the promptings of the voice within, and lay the foundations of the first Gentile Church.”<sup>13</sup> They experienced the meaning of Christ’s words, *“you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.”*

Christ has made it plain to anyone who bears the title of “Christian” that *“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”*<sup>14</sup> When they were first called Christians, it was a title of scorn given them by the citizens of Antioch. They had to invent a name for these “different” people. Do you think that if we were put down in the midst of many unbelievers, people would naturally invent a name like this for us?

Surely our surroundings are only a little different, if at all. If we do not feel the scorn and hatred which the unbelieving heart has for Christ, there is something wrong. It is natural for Christians to be subjected to scorn, ridicule, and severe suffering for Christ’s sake. Our Lord has made this plain. Is it plain to us, or are we trying to “save face” and thereby lose Christ?

One more feature of the Christian life as demonstrated by the Antioch Christians was their readiness to show mercy to the needy. The verses following our text indicate that these Christians were ready — each person and according to his ability — to send relief to their needy fellow Christians in Jerusalem. With the merciful Christ as their Saviour, they had a responsive heart for appeals for the relief of the needy.

The Christian loves to show mercy, because God has been merciful to Him. The history of the Christian Church is filled with illustrations of this Christian virtue. Institutions of mercy are established wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ has spread its saving health for the souls of men. There are good Samaritans wherever there are Christians.

One wonders whether Barnabas could come to our congregation and find what he did at Antioch. We believe he would. He would find people who have been created by God’s Holy Spirit as new creatures in Christ, who have turned to the Saviour and cling to Him by faith. He would see the grace of God at work in the lives of our Christians and discover many whose lives are dedicated to serving God and man.

He would realise that you, too, love God’s Word and are ready to be instructed in the saving truths of Christ so that you persevere in your most holy faith. He would note the love you have for your pastor and teachers, and his heart would be glad. He would rejoice at your mission zeal and note that many of you speak a word for Christ whenever you can. Your interest in the world

mission activities would be noted, as well as your readiness to suffer for the sake of Christ and His Gospel. He would discover that you have a heart for the needy and that you love to show mercy.

But if Barnabas and Paul spent a year with us as they did at Antioch, there would be one question that would concern them in their relation to each one of us. It would not be this, Do you know the answer to the question “*What is a Christian?*” Rather the concern is, Are you a Christian?

If you are, you will want our congregation to be like that of our fellow believers in Antioch, who now enjoy the bliss of heaven. You will ask God to keep you steadfast in your faith in Jesus and by His grace complete the work He began in you on the day of your Baptism.

If anyone is not a Christian, we invite them in Jesus’ name into the company of Christians and into our fellowship with Christ. We are not what we ought to be. We are imperfect in many ways. We know we are not what we want to be. We want to be better Christians.

But this we also know, We are not what once we were. God has been gracious to us, and He wants to be gracious to you, too. Our prayer is that today we may have the same blessing of God in our church as described in our text, “*And a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*” Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4:16

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>3</sup> Hymn 327

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 64:6

<sup>5</sup> Hymn 331

<sup>6</sup> Eph 2:10

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 2:7

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 26:8

<sup>10</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:13

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah 20:9

<sup>12</sup> Mark 16:15

<sup>13</sup> expositions of Holy Scripture: The Acts, Alexander Maclaren

