

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

"And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Acts 11:26.

It is always interesting to discover how a certain place or person received the name by which men and women now know that place or person. Here in this eleventh chapter of the Acts, we have a name which was quite new at that time and full of significance and interest. It is the name "Christian."

This greatest of all names has a beautiful meaning. To know how it originated, and what it stood for, will cause us to ask ourselves to what degree we are worthy of this name.

As a term descriptive of a follower of Christ Jesus, "disciple" takes historical precedence over the name "Christian." We have no record that our Lord ever referred to those whom He saved as Christians, nor did anyone else thus describe them until sometime after His ascension. He called them disciples.

At the time of the persecution of the disciples at Jerusalem, when Stephen was stoned to death, many of the believers in Christ fled from Jerusalem, but, wherever they went, they continued to preach His glorious Gospel. Some of them went over to the island of Cyprus, and others to the town of Cyrene in Africa. From Cyprus and Cyrene these believers, and possibly their converts, came to Antioch.

Hitherto, they had preached the Gospel to the Jews only. In Antioch there was a startling innovation, for they preached the Gospel to the Greeks also, and many of them were saved.

It is interesting that in this new church center of missionary emphasis the members were given the new name "Christians." This name was not applied to them by the unbelieving Jews. Since they refused to admit that Jesus was the Christ, they certainly would never have called His followers by a name that incorporated the word Christ.

It is a certainty that the Christians did not assume the name themselves. The name "Christian" was given to the believers in Antioch by the heathen in that city as a nickname or a term of reproach and derision. It was a term of contempt which was applied by the pagans to the young converts to the Christian faith. To say the least, it was very appropriate. The fact that these pagans named the believers after Christ proves that they recognized and acknowledged their devotion to Christ. It was an acknowledgment of their Christlikeness. This title was given to them by the heathen in testimony to their devotion to Christ and His commands.

The church members in Antioch deserved to be called Christians because they put in practice the spirit of Christ. Their speech was seasoned with grace, their conduct was exemplary, and their joy in the Lord was abounding. They were called Christians because their lives differed from those who were not. Since then each follower of Christ in every clime has been called Christian.

How many there are who would like to be called "Christian," who do call themselves by this name, but whom the name does not fit at all! A Christian is a person who belongs to Christ. The greatest, grandest and most blessed thing in all the world is to be a Christian.

Our Lord said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me." If we learn of Him, and surely that is the very essence of the Christian life, we are His disciples. A disciple is more than one who listens to a teacher. The title implies one's acceptance of the teaching and his effort in accordance with it. The Christian life is a school in which the risen Lord, by the Holy Spirit through His Word, is the Teacher, and believers in Him are the pupils. The Teacher is most understanding, very patient and all-wise; the teaching is profound, practical and pre-eminent; the degree which is received is Christlikeness. What a wonderful world this would be if everyone accepted the Lord Jesus as Saviour, crowned Him as Lord and learned from Him as Teacher! Surely no one would say that a believer in Christ is not to follow Him, not to learn of Him or not to take Him as an example in all things. Moreover, discipleship should not be set aside because it is difficult. Not all things which are easy are true and right.

Christian discipleship is unique. There is nothing like it in the whole realm of learning. Being a disciple of Christ is different from being the disciple of any purely human teacher or the follower of any earthly leader. If a man accepts the theology of Karl Barth, he is called a disciple of Barth. But, being a disciple of Christ is different.

Christian discipleship is unique because of the uniqueness of Christ. He is the sinless Son of man, peerless Son of God, Almighty Saviour, God-man Redeemer, enthroned Lord and final Judge. Christ stands in lonely splendour and solitary grandeur, true God and real man.

Christian discipleship is unique because of the severity of its demands. The terms on which we may be disciples of Christ are laid down by Him in no uncertain way, and no one has any right to alter them in order to suit the changing tastes of men. Discipleship is a progressive and unfolding relationship with Christ in which the will must be held in submission to the revealed will of the Master. The will of Christ is to be the law of our lives. He must be first in our thoughts and affections. He will not share the throne of the redeemed personality with anyone, regardless of how great that one may be.

Christian discipleship is unique because of the power which is communicated to us to enable us to be worthy disciples. There is the power of the Holy Spirit without which we never could follow the Lord or learn of Him. We need to be enlightened and empowered. Those who choose to follow human leaders have to do so in their own strength, but, for following Christ, divine power is imparted to us. We fail because we have not learned the art of appropriating all that is ours in the reigning Christ. Our sufficiency is of God. The source from which we draw never runs dry.

Christian discipleship is unique because of the reward which awaits us at the end of the journey. After this life, with its trials and disappointments, is over, there will be fulness of life and everlasting happiness at God's right hand.

I. Christian Discipleship Means Learning Of Christ As Infallible Teacher.

Christ not only taught the truth, but He was the truth. He is our Saviour from all sin, and He is the final authority to which we bow. To the believer in Christ His Word is final. He said, "Learn of me."

In order to learn of Christ aright there must be the renunciation of preconceived ideas. There must be open-mindedness and single-mindedness. We should be willing to let go of that which is not substantiated by the Word of God and hold on to all that Christ taught. There must be the diligent and prayerful study of the inspired Word and an humble dependence on the Holy Spirit.

From Christ we learn about the character of God. Christ came to reveal God to us. He teaches us that God is holy, just, loving and sovereign, and the Father of all those who trust in Christ. From Christ we learn about the nature of man. He teaches that all are sinners and need to be saved; that all are dead and need to be regenerated. From Christ we learn about the value of spiritual things; also, about the value of the soul. Dictators may look upon men as mere cogs in the machine of state, but Christ looked upon them as persons who are precious to God and are of inestimable value. He taught that to gain the whole world and lose the soul is a bad bargain. The soul is worth more than the whole material universe. Christ bled and died to redeem the soul from the power of sin.

II. Christian Discipleship Means Following Christ As Triumphant Leader.

Christ is the divinely appointed and only qualified leader. He is the file-leader of our faith, the divine pathfinder for all who follow Him. To all who accept Him as Saviour He says, "Follow Me." We should follow in His steps. We should follow Him along the pathway of holiness. He never leads into the by-paths of sin. His way is the shining highway of fellowship with Himself and separation from the sins of the old life.

We should follow Christ along the pathway of obedience. If we love Him and wish to please Him, we shall keep His commandments, and they will not be grievous. It will be a delight to do the little extra because it pleases Him. The pathway of unquestioning obedience to the will of Christ leads to the heights of overflowing blessing. With the avowal of our faith in Christ, and the affirmation of our love for Him, there should be wholehearted obedience to Him. We should follow Him along the pathway of victorious prayer. To Him prayer was fellowship with His Father, and to us it cannot mean anything less. He is calling His followers away from the throng's ignoble strife to the quiet place of prayer, where truth is learned, character is formed and spiritual victories are won. Let us see to it that all of us who are Christians are loving, faithful and obedient disciples of Christ.