

Christians First

Acts 11:19-30

There is quite a variety of OPINION as to what a CHRISTIAN is or is not. Some say being a Christian has something to do with the country you live in. Others seem to believe the political party you choose or the family you are born into determines whether you are a Christian. I have talked with some who refer to themselves as Christians they're not something else so they must be Christian. I have preached many sermons regarding becoming a Christian. Still over these many years, I have concluded that even some in the church miss the big picture.

1st, being a Christian is NOT related to PHYSICAL BIRTH.

In other words, I'm a Christian but I was not born that way. My parents took me to church in my youth. My granddad was a preacher so if the church doors were open when we were with him, we were there sitting on the front pew. Family taught me Christian principles. **But all this did not make me a Christian.** A person does not become a Christian as a result of being born or raised in a Christian home. Salvation is not related to physical birth. **You cannot be BORN a Christian.** In fact, Jesus taught that you must be **RE-BORN!**

2nd becoming a Christian is NOT REFORMATION.

By that I mean, it's not turning over a new leaf—you know, acting like a Christian—trying to live a better life. I believe everyone should try to live a moral life. But this should be a **RESULT** of the new birth that we experience when we become Christians. Just turning over a new leaf and trying to do the right thing—simply trying to live a moral life—these efforts do not make you a Christian.

Being A CHRISTIAN means you have personally experienced a new birth that has changed your inner nature. Attempting to live up to the standards of Christianity—**ACTING** like a child of God—**doesn't make you a Christian!!**

3rd, a person does NOT become a Christian by way of any external RELIGIOUS ACTION.

I mean, you don't become a Christian by joining a church. Please don't misunderstand me—church membership—and **REGULAR**—not just Christmas and Easter—participation in that church's work and worship is VERY important. All Christians should get involved in its ministry, using their talents—which by the way we were given for this exact purpose. In Corinthians Paul says all Christians have gifts and each was given these gifts, *“for the good of all”*—to be used in a local church's ministry. But the fact is church membership does not MAKE you a Christian. You can join yourself to a church and follow its teaching faithfully—you can serve on a plethora of committees—but church membership is for people who have **already become Christians.**

As I said earlier, that's where this text comes in. By studying the Christians in Antioch and how they lived, we see what a genuine Christian should LOOK LIKE. We learn how to recognize a Christian.

Antioch was a long way from Jerusalem—400 miles to the north. But as the text says, Christians from Jerusalem had fled there because of the persecution that arose after Stephen's death. Luke tells us that wherever these believers from Jerusalem fled, they shared their faith, most of them only with fellow Jews. But thank God, that mold was broken. Some of these dispersed believers who were originally from Cyprus fled to Antioch and began sharing their faith with Gentiles. And, through their efforts the first Gentile church was born.

Antioch was a major ancient metropolis. It was the third largest city in the empire, behind only Rome and Alexandria, with a population of about 500,000. It was the only city in the ancient world that had its streets lighted at night. Many trade routes passed through Antioch. This not only made it a wealthy and culturally diverse city; it also made it a vile place full of pagan worship and sexual immorality.

One of the biggest contributors to Antioch's depravity was the temple of Daphne that was located five miles outside the city. This temple was supposedly built in some laurel groves and so on its grounds Apollo's pursuit was reenacted night and day by "worshipers" and ritual prostitutes. Antioch was also home to chariot racing, gambling, and other forms of depravity. So, think of it as the "red light" district of the world. But despite the prevalence of all this immorality, a powerful Christian church started and **GREW** in Antioch. The way its members lived led to their being given this name: "Christians." I think if we look closely at this text, we'll see what we should do if we want to be labeled in the same way. There are three things that we can learn from these believers that will help us to be KNOWN as a Christian.

1 - The first lesson. BEING a Christian SHOWS.

Antioch was a very UNGODLY place and against this dark backdrop the believers' Christlikeness was obvious. The "light" of their relationship with Jesus shown brightly in that dark sin-filled city. This reminds me of Paul's words in Philippians 2:15-16 where he challenges the members of the church at Philippi to, *"...become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you SHINE like stars in the universe..."*

This should help us see that as Christians, we should shine. Our faith should SHOW. Our world is just as dark as Antioch—maybe darker, so if we live the Christian life, it will naturally contrast against the backdrop of our fallen culture.

The light of our love for Jesus will make us STAND OUT. You see being a Christian is not REFORMATION—it is TRANSFORMATION. When we obey Jesus, we are REBORN—we are TRANSFORMED into new people. The more we allow God’s transforming power to work in our lives, the more our faith will show—the more we STAND OUT.

As Paul says in Romans 12, we are not to “*...conform...to the pattern of this world...*” No, BEING a Christian in a fallen world means being different. The closer we walk with Jesus the more it will change us.

So, if someone who claims to be a Christian is not different—if they do not stand out, it calls into question the sincerity and depth of their faith, because as Spurgeon once put it, “**an unchanged life is the sign of an uncleansed heart.**”

This text infers that “*Christian*” is not a name we give ourselves, it’s more of a designation that others should give us. Our neighbors and co-workers should see the way we live—our morals and behavior and think, “**That person is different. What is it about them? Oh yes, now I know. That person must be A Christian.**” There is often a big difference between what one CLAIMS to be and what others KNOW him to be. This leads to the second lesson we can learn if we are to better understand what it means to BE a Christian.

2 – The Second Lesson. Christians GROW!

When the church in Jerusalem heard what was going on in Antioch—that people were coming to the Lord—they send Barnabas to investigate. When he arrived, he saw that growth was genuine and he sent for Paul to help him nurture all the new Christians that were daily being added to that growing church. Then verse 26 says that “*...for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and TAUGHT great numbers of people.*” And, only after that year-long study were these believers in Antioch referred to as Christians. This says that to be KNOWN as a follower of Jesus requires spiritual GROWTH.

As Kierkegaard once said, **“To become an admirer of Jesus is much easier than it is to become a follower of Jesus.”**

If we don't make a conscious decision to grow spiritually and allow Jesus to transform us so that we become more like Him we WILL blend in to our culture and become like the world around us. Paul said, ***“Don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*** Implied in this admonition is the fact that if you're not being transformed by God's renewing power, then you're being conformed by the forces opposed to God. And if the world is going to SEE us as Christians, we are going to have to strive to become Christ like by using Bible study and prayer and worship. Another thing this text says about BEING a Christian is this:

3 – The Third Lesson. A Christian GIVES!

Verse 29 says that in response to the prophecy of Agabus of a severe famine, these new Christians took up an offering to send to the church in Jerusalem. And down through the ages, maturing Christians have been known for this same practice of selfless, generous giving of their money—their time—their talents. This is because when we grow spiritually, we become like God—Who loved so much that He GAVE—and Who is the source of every good and perfect GIFT.

I recently read a powerful story about a brother in Christ, who lives in Bagdad and teaches English to both help struggling Iraqi businessman.

While passing through a checkpoint one day an American MP saw his North Carolina drivers license and asked if he was in the ministry. Winship asked, “Why do you ask that?” And the soldier said, “Why else would you live here?” In other words, the only motive this soldier could think of for a man to bring his family to Iraq would be as a minister, as a Christian—to GIVE to those needy, hurting people.