

To Be Christians Only

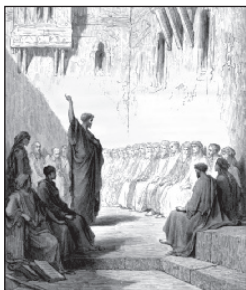
Growing In Gospel Living: Shelf 2 — Volume 11

Over two thousand years ago the disciples of Jesus were called Christians. In fact, they *“were first called Christians in Antioch”* of Syria.¹ Today, many people of faith have always wondered what it meant to be just a Christian in the first century in the midst of so many confused idolatrous religions. We, too, have wondered why, among the thousands of citizens of the city of Antioch, this particular group of people were simply referred to as “Christians.”

Likewise today, there are thousands of people of faith throughout the world who are quite confused. By simply “believing” in Jesus Christ, some have concluded that they are Christians, regardless of their moral behavior, or what they believe in reference to establishing a covenant relationship with God through His Son. It is thus quite difficult today to find someone who is truly just a Christian.

We Must Have
A Covenant
With God
In Order To
Be Saved.

We must connect with this thought that throughout the first century there were religious cults everywhere. They were all idolatrous religions. Nevertheless, in the midst of so many idolatrous beliefs and religious groups in the first century, thousands of people responded to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be united as one body of faith. They desired to be Christians only. We can do the same today. But we can do this only if we commit ourselves to what it means to be a Christian.



Thousands of people in the first century became Christians because of the overwhelming evidence that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a prophet. He was the actual incarnation of God

in the flesh of humanity just as He claimed to be. And in order to come out of the religious confusion that existed in those days, and be set free from the bondage of sin and idolatrous religion, millions of people then and now are rethinking what it means to be just a Christian. People of faith are discovering that one can be just a Christian regardless of where he or she sits on Sunday morning.

1. Where were the disciples of Jesus when they were first called Christians?
(A) Jerusalem, (B) Antioch, (C) Rome, (D) Damascus

~ Desiring To Be Christians Only ~

People of faith today are hungering and thirsting to maintain a simple faith as opposed to being marooned in the confusion of numerous systems of religion that divide people from one another with unique names or traditional religious heritages. Because so many people today are frustrated with so much division among Christians, they want to restore Christianity to its original simplicity as it was in the first century. **They simply want to be simple Christians.**

For this reason, we, too, want to be Christians only. That's all. Nothing more. Nothing less. **If one needs more than what God requires in the Bible to be a Christian, then he or she is seeking too much.** In fact, it might be shockingly true in one's existing religiosity, that he or she feels right with God, but in reality he or she is not a Christian according to the definition of a Christian in the Bible.

If our definition of being a Christian is less than what God explains in His word, then again, we will fall short of being a Christian.

But we must not be frustrated. In a world of conflicting and confusing religious beliefs and practices, anyone can be just a Christian. One can be just a Christian **if he or she is willing to focus on the word of God as the only authority (dictionary) upon which we base our faith.** What is very encouraging



The Christian's
Only Authority
In Matters Of Faith!

today is that thousands of people around the world want to free themselves, as in the first century, from the bondage of religious restrictions. And in order to be free they are turning to the only road map that will successfully lead them out of the confusion that is caused by so many religious groups that exist today. This road map is the word of God.

Being Christian
Means Freedom
From Religion.

Thousands of people have simply concluded that they can be a disciple of Christ without being in the bondage of religious institutions that are identified by religious traditions or codes of man-made laws. It is a surprising phenomenon of these times that people of faith throughout the world are thirsting to be set free from the bondage of traditional religious heritages and misguided religiosity. These people are striving for fellowship and encouragement with one another on this road to restore the authority of the word of God as the foundation of their faith. It is our plea, therefore, that all of us who are on this journey, join together in order to restore the simple New Testament Christianity that is based solely on the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through obedience of the gospel, anyone can be just a Christian without placing their membership with a particular religious institution that seeks one's loyalty as a club member. For this reason, we believe it is time to restore the Lord Jesus as the only King of all those who believe in Him and have obeyed the good news of His death for our sins and resurrection for our hope. This is in contrast to the efforts of some religious organizations that covet our membership, possibly for our purse and not our person. We must remember that as a Christian, **our membership is in heaven alone**, right at the feet of our reigning King Jesus. In this way we are the universal church of Christ on earth.

We would begin our search in the first century about two decades after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. Those who became disciples then were first known as those of "the Way."

In fact, as recorded in Acts 9:2, when Saul—later Paul—**went from house to house** in the persecution of those who gave up Judaism, he searched for those who were of “the Way.” It was not until at least ten years later that those of “the Way” were called Christians in Antioch of Syria.



The Early Christians Met in Their Homes.

The word “Christian” that was tagged on those of “the Way” means that they were “of Christ.” That is, as a Christian one belongs to Christ alone. Christians are followers of the person of the Lord Jesus and His teachings because they have responded to the good news that He brought into the world. One who has been obedient to the gospel, and thus follows the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, is just a Christian. Nothing more, nothing less. Are you interested? If so, then this plea is your invitation to join with us and millions around the world who have discovered the freedom that one can enjoy by being just a Christian. You can enjoy freedom from all those religious groups that have coveted our allegiance.

When one determines to establish his or her faith on the word of God alone, then he or she can be a Christian only, regardless of all the religious traditions or divided religious sects among which we live today.

2. What is the first decision one must make in order to be only a Christian?

(A) Establish the word of God as one’s only authority, (B) Maintain his or her religious heritage, (C) Agree with the unique teachings of every person of faith, (D) Determine what church one must join

~ Branded By Christ Alone ~

Every Christian throughout the world seeks to be identified by the name of Christ. Being a Christian means just that. There is no such thing in the New Testament that Christians are to be branded by unique names that would denominate (divide) them into denominated groups. On the contrary, in the first century, believers in Jesus were simply known as Christians. They were not identified with a unique

name that would separate them from one another. They were not divided into different denominations simply because religious denominations that exist today **did not exist in the first century**. Christians were simply Christians because of what they believed and obeyed, and how they lived the gospel they obeyed. Therefore, in order to be a Christian today, we must put away any unique name that would separate us from one another, or anyone who has likewise obeyed the gospel in baptism and are seeking to be Christians only.

Unique Names
Divide. Gospel
Alone Unites.

When one determines to wear the name of Christ alone, and is obedient to the gospel, then regardless of his or her religious heritage, he or she is just a Christian.

We must not make being a Christian more complicated than this. If one would define himself or herself as a Christian by adding characteristics that are more than what the word of God defines a Christian to be, then he or she is asking for too much. At the same time, if we diminish any characteristic that the word of God reveals one to be a Christian, then one is not a Christian.

Where One Sits
On Sunday Morning
Does Not Define
Him As A Christian.

3. What is the first identity of a Christian?

(A) Belief in one church, (B) Faith in Jesus, (C) Obedience to gospel

~ Why Be Only A Christian ~

We are Christians because Jesus fulfilled over 300 Old Testament prophecies that were written about Him centuries before He came into this world. Since He fulfilled all these prophecies, then we must conclude that He is the Christ (the Messiah), and thus, He must be believed. He must be accepted as the One who fulfilled all those Old Testament prophecies from Genesis 3:15 onward.

Fulfilled Prophecy
Is God's Miracle
In Words.

Even before the world was created, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit planned that the Son of God would

be incarnate in the flesh of man for the salvation of mankind. When the time was right in the history, therefore, the Son of God was incarnate in the flesh of man. The following is a list of only a few of the numerous fulfilled prophecies concerning the Son of God coming into this world:



Prophecy Proves Christianity.

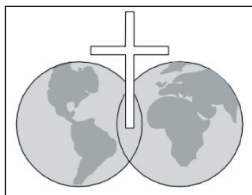
- ▶ He would be, and was a descendant of Abraham to whom God promised would bless all humanity (Gn 12:1-3; Gl 3:16).
- ▶ He would be, and was born in Bethlehem (Mc 5:2; Mt 2:1,3).
- ▶ He would be, and was a sojourner in Egypt (Hs 11:1; Mt 2:15).
- ▶ He would be, and was a teacher of the Jews and Gentiles (Is 42:1-4; Mt 12:18-21).
- ▶ He would work, and did work miracles before even unbelievers (Is 35:5,6; Lk 7:18-23).
- ▶ He would be, and was betrayed (Zc 13:7; Mt 26:55,56).
- ▶ He would die, but be raised from the dead (Ps 16:10; Jn 2:19-22).

Being just a Christian means that one has accepted the Lord Jesus as the fulfillment of all prophecies that pointed to His coming into this world.

4. What does it mean when Jesus fulfilled all Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah?
 (A) He was the Messiah, (B) He was the Christ, (C) Both A & B

~ Unity Among Christians ~

God expects His people to be united throughout the world. Though there were city assemblies of Christians in the first century as *“the church of God that is at Corinth”*² and *“the saints who are at Ephesus,”*³ all local assemblies of Christians that were scattered throughout the first century were part of **the one**



There Is Only One Church Throughout The World.

universal church. Even in the cities, as noted, the New Testament focuses on the church as one people, not as autonomous assemblies within the cities.

When reference was made in the New Testament to all the saints, a collective phrase was used, as in the statement, *“All the churches [assemblies] of Christ greet you.”*⁴ No local assembly of Christians validated themselves as Christian by proclaiming autonomy from other Christians

Unity Assumes
That Christians
Are Connected
By The Gospel.



that were meeting at other locations in the same city, or in another city, town or village. On the contrary, all individual Christians were members of the one universal body of Christ that existed throughout the world. Therefore, **there is only one church of our Lord Jesus Christ.** It is this church

that is made up of all those who have responded to the gospel throughout the world, and thus, are just Christians as a result of their obedient response of the gospel.

God expects Christians to be united together as one universal church of believers. He urges that all Christians *“speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you [Christians], but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”*⁵ Christians are

The Gospel
Inherently
Produces Unity.

not to divide themselves by binding as law any unique religious heritage, religious traditions, or any matters of opinion in reference to interpretations of the word of God. As obedient disciples of Jesus who have given themselves over to King Jesus in response to His gospel, all Christians are to stand fast in the faith and strive together with one heart and soul in order to maintain unity among themselves. It is as the apostle Paul encouraged: *“Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”*⁶

Through the power of the gospel of His death for our sins, the revelation of hope through His resurrection,

and present kingdom reign, our unity as Christians is made sure. Christians are, as a united body, a mighty worldwide force against evil. Everyone who struggles in this world of turmoil should be encouraged to be-

Obedience To The Gospel Inherently Unifies People.

come a part of this worldwide force of believers in order to make this a better world in which everyone can live. But in order to be encouraged as a Christian, we must strive to restore the one united body of Christ wherein we can find close fellowships. **Since all Christians throughout the world are the one church of Christ, then groups of Christians in any area of the world do not have the right to declare their autonomy or independence from any other group of Christians in their community.**

Because Jesus is King of kings, His subjects in His worldwide kingdom are universally one people.

5. What does God expect from those who are Christians only? (A) They should meet in autonomous groups, (B) They should be the one universal church, (C) They should seek to establish common heritages, (D) None of the preceding

~ Jesus Prayed For Unity ~

Jesus prayed that those who follow Him should be united as one. This is that for which He prayed in the following prayer:

I do not pray for these [disciples] alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word, that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.⁷

Jesus did not pray that we would be satisfied with the division among ourselves into different religious groups according to our unique heritages, or different religious rituals or Sunday ceremonies. On the contrary, He prayed that all His disciples throughout the world who believe in Him, and who have obeyed the gospel, should work together as one body of believers in order to answer

Being Christian Means That Every Christian Seeks Out Other Christians.

His prayer that we all seek to maintain unity. It is for this reason that we are striving to be united in order to call all people of the world into a covenant relationship with God through individual obedience to the gospel. Coming into this covenant relationship in Christ is exactly what Paul had in mind when the Holy Spirit directed him to write the following explanation of our obedience to the gospel:

Therefore, we are buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead through the glory of the Father, even so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, we will also be in the likeness of His resurrection.⁸

We must not forget, therefore, **that inherent in the one gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ there is the unity of believers for which Jesus prayed.** The fact that Jesus prayed for unity among His disciples is proof that unity among all Christians can be realized if His desire for unity is the desire of our own hearts. All those who have obeyed the gospel, therefore, are brought into unity with one another in Christ, into whom they were all baptized.

Living the gospel of the Lord Jesus after coming into a covenant relationship with Him, is living in a way that promotes unity among all those who have obeyed the gospel. If one has sincerely obeyed the gospel, then he or she cannot separate himself or herself from others who have likewise obeyed the gospel.

6. Being the one church assumes what?

- (A) Every member has obeyed the gospel, (B) Members are simply Christians, (C) A & B

~ **Being Free To Be Only A Christian** ~

Being just a Christian sets us free. We are set free from the bondage of religious restrictions that others might impose on us as law, which restrictions have no authority in the word of God. This means that believers in Jesus can be just Christians without being a part of any man-made religious organization

that is defined by unique beliefs or ceremonies that identify and validate such groups as unique. Christians are free from all those religious catechisms that have no authority of the Bible. In this way all believers in Jesus who have responded to and obeyed the gospel can be free from being divided into different religious groups, which groups are often denominated from one another, either by unique names or conflicting religious doctrines.

Bible Authority
Allows Us
To Live In Peace.

However, we must keep in mind that one can be free to be a Christian only by allowing the Bible to be his or her sole authority in matters faith. Since we will be judged only by the word of Jesus, then we are free in matters of faith to be accountable only to the word of Jesus. We must never forget what Jesus promised: *“The word that I have spoken, the same will judge”* everyone in the last day.⁹ **When people of faith establish the word of God as their only sure foundation in matters of faith, then unity among believers will prevail.** But not only unity, one is set free in mind, knowing that he or she will never be judged by Jesus on the basis of some man-originated religious tradition, ceremony or behavior in worship. For example, if someone bows to his or her knees in prayer, this is a matter tradition. Such a practice

cannot be bound on the consciences of others. Likewise, if someone raises his or her hands in worship, it is a matter of freedom. Such behavior cannot become a tradition to be bound on others. These are matters that have no authority in the word of God, and thus fall in the area of freedom of choice.



Freedom In
Worship.

Since the Bible is the Spirit-inspired word of God,¹⁰ then we are free to allow the Bible alone to direct us in godly living. Since this word is our source of faith, then we are free to allow it to be the only foundation upon which we base our faith. It is still true that *“faith comes by hear-*

Unity Can Be
Realized Only
When The Bible
Is Our
Only Authority.

ing and hearing by the word of Christ."¹¹ Therefore, Christians listen to Christ, not to the religious commandments of men.

It is certainly not wrong to carry on with religious traditions. All of us have our unique religious traditions and ceremonies. However, religious traditions and unique ceremonies must never be bound on others in a manner by which the traditions and ceremonies cause division among Christians. We must never forget what the Holy Spirit said in reference to those who had been set free from the traditions of men: *"Stand fast therefore, in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."*¹²

In order that the truth of the gospel set us truly free, **we must agree to allow the word of Jesus to be our final authority in matters of faith**, not our former religious traditions or unique ceremonies. During

His earthly ministry, Jesus, in the midst of so many religious beliefs, promised, *"You will know the truth and the truth will make you free"*¹³

Freedom In Christ
Means Freedom
The Church
Laws Of Men.

Therefore, we seek to know the truth of the gospel in order to be set free from the religious confusion that we witness in the world today.

We must speak, therefore, where the Bible speaks. But where the Bible says nothing about a certain religious practice, we must allow freedom of opinion in an atmosphere of loving discussion. When one is a Christian only, therefore, he or she is very cautious about imposing on others religious traditions or any established rituals

When Traditions
Are Considered Law,
Then The Traditions
Work Against
The Law Of Christ.

or ceremonies that are not found in the Bible. **We are not truly set free in Christ if we continue in the bondage of divisive religious heritages and unique ritualistic ceremonies that divide us from one another.** We can be free only when the word of God is the final source and authority for our faith. Religious traditions must never be exalted above the word of God.

7. What will be the Christian's final standard by which he or she will be judged?
 (A) Faithful adherence to one's religious heritage, (B) The word of the Lord Jesus Christ, (C) Faithfulness to a particular religious group
8. What sets us free?
 (A) The teachings of men, (B) Agreement in opinions, (C) The truth

~ First Principles To Be Christians Only ~

Being just a Christian in the community means believing and doing good to all people. Being a Christian means being a disciple who works in thanksgiving for what Jesus has done for us through the gospel. In order for anyone to get started in living as a Christian only, the following are fundamental beliefs that all Christians must maintain in their lives:

- ▶ Believe in the one true and living God (Is 44:6; Ep 4:4-6).
- ▶ Believe in Jesus as the one Lord (Jn 20:30,31; Ep 4:4-6).
- ▶ Believe in the one universal body, the church (Cl 1:18).
- ▶ Believe in the one Holy Spirit and His fruit (Gl 5:22,23).
- ▶ Believe in the one baptism (immersion) (At 2:38; Ep 4:4-6).
- ▶ Believe in the one faith (Ep 4:4-6; Jd 3).
- ▶ Believe in holy and moral living (Cl 3:12-17; 1 Pt 1:15).
- ▶ Believe in Jesus' principle of love (Jn 13:34,35; 14:15).
- ▶ Believe in the one gospel (Rm 1:13-16; 1 Co 15:1-4).

Being united as Christians means that we must all start our Christian journey with Jesus on the foundation of the preceding beliefs. This means that we must all agree that the word of God will be our only source of authority in our study of these beliefs.

9. What are some necessary truths to believe in order to be only a Christian?
 (A) There is one baptism, (B) There is one universal church, (C) A & B

~ Expectations Of Christians ~

As a result of their commitment to Jesus, Christians expect to live the abundant life of spiritual and emotional peace of mind in this world.

Jesus came *"that we may have life,"* and that we might have *"the peace of God that surpasses all understanding."*¹⁴ Christians know and expect that all

Being A Christian
Inherently Brings
Persecution.

things will work together for good.¹⁵ They expect that

they will not be tempted beyond what they are able to endure.¹⁶

However, because of their commitment to be working disciples for their Lord Jesus, disciples of Jesus expect persecution from those whom Satan is using to destroy the work of God. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, therefore, reminded one dedicated disciple of this: *“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”*¹⁷ Therefore, Christians have peace of mind in the fact that the word of God tells them not to be ashamed of their stand for the gospel of Jesus, but to glorify God by living as a Christian: *“If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name.”*¹⁸

Since the disciples of Jesus are more than Christians in name only, they understand that obedient service in response to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ will stir up persecution against them. But they also remember that the reward for faithful discipleship is eternal life in heaven. In being Christians only, therefore, we must expect that those who are bound to either man-made doctrines, or man-originated religious institutions, will persecute those who would stand for being Christians only. **It is simply natural for those who do not conform to the norm of the accepted religiosity of those who are in the bondage of religion to be persecuted by those who do.**

So in writing to Christians who were in the midst of great persecution, the Holy Spirit wrote the following note of encouragement through the apostle Peter: *“But rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”*¹⁹ He then concluded his encouragement by writing, *“Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to Him in doing right, as to a faithful Creator.”*²⁰

10. If one lives as a Christian, what must he or she expect from the unbelieving world?

(A) Rejection, (B) Persecution, (C) Suffering, (D) A,B & C

~ **Anyone Can Be Just A Christian** ~

In order to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, **one must first believe that Jesus Christ is the actual incarnation of the Son of God into the flesh of man.** One cannot be a Christian unless he or she believes that the Son of God came into this world in the flesh of a Jewish man. It is as the following statement that followed the apostle John's defense of the Lord Jesus as the incarnate Son of God:

*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. **But these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life through His name.***²¹

One must then respond to this good news (gospel) of His incarnation by being immersed into fellowship with Jesus Christ in His name in order to put on Christ. The Holy Spirit clearly explained this in the following words: ***“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”***

One Becomes
A Christian When
He Or She Is
Baptized Into Christ.

²² Jesus is calling today upon everyone in the world to respond to the good news of His death for your sins, resurrection for our hope, and emotional security that comes from acknowledging His present kingdom reign over all things.²³ If one responds to the call of King Jesus, then he or she can be just a Christian.

Great things will subsequently happen in one's life.²⁴ It is for this reason that we encourage everyone to respond to the good news of all those events that the Lord Jesus accomplished when He came into this world in order to deliver us out of this world. His coming into this world is the greatest news that one could ever hear. We must never forget the following words of the Holy Spirit that were written in 2 Corinthians 4:15 by the hand of the apostle Paul:

*For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace that is reaching many people **may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.***

- 11.** In order to begin one's life journey as a Christian, what must he or she do?
(A) Join a church, **(B)** Simply believe on Jesus, **(C)** Obey the gospel (baptism) in the name of Jesus, **(D)** A & B
- 12.** In order to be a Christian, what is the first thing one must believe?
(A) The incarnation of the Son of God, **(B)** There is only one universal church, **(C)** That one can be a Christian only

Encouraging Research: **1.** Acts 11:26, **2.** 1 Corinthians 1:2, **3.** Acts 20:17, **4.** Romans 16:16, **5.** 1 Corinthians 1:10, **6.** Philippians 1:27; Colossians 1:2-16, **7.** John 17:20,21, **8.** Romans 6:3-6, **9.** John 12:48, **10.** 2 Timothy 3:16,17, **11.** Romans 10:17, **12.** Galatians 5:1; see Mark 7:1-9; **13.** John 8:32; **14.** John 10:10; Philippians 4:6,7, **15.** Romans 8:28, **16.** 1 Corinthians 10:13, **17.** 2 Timothy 3:12, **18.** 1 Peter 4:16, **19.** 1 Peter 4:13, **20.** 1 Peter 4:16, see Acts 11:26; Matthew 5:10, **21.** John 20:30,31, **22.** Galatians 3:26,27, **23.** See Matthew 28:18; 2 Corinthians 4:15-18; Ephesians 1:15-23; Colossians 1:12-14, **24.** Acts 2:38,47

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. Why were the early disciples of Christ called Christians?
2. In reference to religion, from what were the early Christians set free?
3. In order to be just a Christian, why must the word of God be our final authority in all matters of faith?
4. Why do the religions of man bring one into bondage?
5. Why does one not "place membership" with a religious group after becoming a Christian?
6. Why does the teaching that one can be a Christian by faith only is not a New Testament teaching?
7. Why did the denominational religious groups that we witness today throughout the world not exist in the first century?
8. Why does prophecy prove that Christianity is not a religion?
9. Why is it true that Christians are inherently united worldwide?
10. How does the gospel unity Christians as one worldwide church?
11. Why is it that when one who obeys the gospel that he or she does not need to join a particular religious group in order to be a Christian?
12. What must people do in order to answer the prayer of Jesus that His disciples be united?
13. From what is one set free if he or she is just a Christian?
14. How do the religious traditions of men divide people of faith from one another?
15. Why must one expect persecution if he or she seeks to be only a Christian?

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