

"If You Abide In My Word..."

A study of John 8:31,32 by Guy Orbison, Jr.

The terms, *Christian* and *disciple*, are used interchangeably in Scripture (Acts 11:26). Each word carries its own distinctiveness, but *disciple* always denotes the student or learner. We may also add *believer* to this word group which describes Christ-followers. Each of these terms carried great significance in the first century in which they were given birth, but are generally muddled in our own time.

In the early beginnings of the church, no one had difficulty identifying those who should be called *Christian*, *disciple*, or *believer*. Yet the intervening centuries have seen a gradual development of the problem of identification. A confused world must now distinguish varieties of Christians based on denominational allegiance.

Obviously, not all who wear these designations are entitled to them. Just as Paul explained the meaning of *Jew* in Romans 2:17-29, Jesus clarifies our understanding of *disciple* in John 8:31,32. In the midst of so many modern definitions, just who are the true disciples? The distinguishing elements are laid out in these words of Jesus: "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (Jn 8:31,32 NASV).

The Context

Jesus was in the city of Jerusalem on the occasion of the Feast of Booths (Jn 7:2, 10). A crowd gathers in the area of the temple when Jesus delivers the teaching recorded in John 8 (see vs. 2, 20, 59). Within the audience are some religious leaders who oppose Jesus and want Him dead (vs. 13). But John also notes in his narrative that as Jesus was discussing the matters recorded prior to our passage, "...many came to believe in Him" (vs. 30). The words of Jesus in verses 31 and 32 seem to be directed to these who "came to believe."

Students of John's gospel wrestle with the

question of whether these who came to believe are genuine in their belief. The struggle is due to the pronoun, "they," found in verses 33 ("They answered Him..."), 39 ("They answered and said to Him..."), and 41 ("They said to Him..."). In each of these verses, the response of the "they" to Jesus' teaching seems inconsistent with people who have become disciples of the Lord. Yet there is no getting around the context that the "they" must refer to those who came to believe and that Jesus is directing His thoughts to this group within the audience.

The reader should recognize that John uses the term "believe" as James uses the term "faith." There are two levels of faith or belief:

1) The primary level involves the intellectual acceptance of certain facts. When you accept something as true, then it may be said that you believe it. James would argue that this intellectual acceptance of facts is insufficient to save you (James 2:14-26). John also presents the idea that this level of faith only brings you to the first step of salvation. In his words, believers of this sort have "the right to become children of God" (1:12). What one must *become*, he is yet to *be*.

2) Thus, there is a second level of belief which moves beyond intellectual insight. It is the kind of belief that leads to behavior based on the belief.

James argues that demons have only the first level of belief and this is why they will not be saved. On the other hand, James illustrates saving faith with the examples of Rahab and Abraham, who behaved in accordance with their belief.

Many will claim to be disciples, calling Jesus their Lord (Matt. 7:21-23), but the mere claim is insufficient to make them genuine followers of the Christ. We may safely conclude that here in John 8:30, there are those in the crowd who have reached the first level of faith and are beginning to accept Jesus and some of the claims He is making to them. The ensuing conversation probably indicates that these will rise no higher in faith than this.

To these Jesus will now address His thoughts. He will lay before them the qualities of true disciples.

Truly Disciples

There are three points to be found in the words of Jesus which set forth the qualities of genuine followers of Christ.

1. True disciples are those who abide in His Word.

If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine...

Note that "if" denotes a condition of expectancy. One can expect the conclusion to be true only if the condition stated prevails. In other words, one may be counted as a true disciple "if" and only "if" he meets the condition stated here, i.e. if he abides in the word of Jesus.

"Abide" means to remain in or to live within the sphere of the teaching of Jesus. Bruce correctly states, "To 'remain' in Jesus' 'word' is to adhere to his teaching - to direct their lives by it" (FF. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, Eerdmans, 1983, p. 196). The "word," of course, refers to the message Jesus brought from heaven. It is the gospel of salvation; it is the heavenly standard of conduct for those who wish to follow Christ.

The condition also implies that if one is not remaining in this word, then he is not a true disciple...no matter what he might claim. Within the present religious culture, many confuse loyalty to church tradition or doctrine as abiding in the word. These church loyalists could never be true disciples of Jesus because they do not meet the condition of discipleship. Being church-centered is not the same as being Christ-centered.

2. True disciples know the truth.

...and you shall know the truth...

Jesus indicates that knowing truth is a natural consequence of abiding in the word. When one stays within the limits of the teaching of God's word, he is certain to arrive at truth. To refuse to remain within the teaching of Jesus is to listen to someone other than Jesus, making one a disciple of someone other than Christ. Note that Jesus' statement places emphasis on *My word* and *disciples of Mine*.

The word, "know" is a biblical term of relationship. It involves more than recognition of certain facts. Some people may have a

comprehension of the facts, but if they live out their existence in contradiction to these facts, we could never say they really "know" truth. But, when a man abides in the word of Christ, continually adjusting his behavior to the Lord's teaching, he enters into a new relationship with truth.

True disciples are people who want truth. They are not interested in following lies or deception. Therefore, they have no loyalty to any religion or denomination. If they are truly disciples, then their loyalty is to Christ. They want only His word.

Consider two important points of application: 1) True disciples will not listen to their church...rather they will listen to Christ. A modern church may or may not require very much from her members. Today, in a number of religious groups, you can be a member in good standing and have only a sporadic attendance record, never contribute a dime, and never involve yourself in ministry. But the true disciple wants to know what Jesus says and what Jesus requires of him... not what comes forth from his church organization. He wants to be right with his Lord, not his church. 2) In like manner, a true disciple never looks for "loopholes" in Christ's word so that he might somehow justify his sinful actions or a new direction he would like to take in doctrine. The true disciple wants only truth... no matter how painful... no matter what the personal cost. True disciples will never manipulate the Scriptures nor twist them and misinterpret them to satisfy what they want to believe and practice. Paul predicted to Timothy what has now become reality: that there would be some who "...will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3,4). Peter also speaks of those who distort Scripture to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16).

The twin sisters of "tickling ears" and "distorting Scripture" continually have an appeal to those who are not genuine disciples. They offer salvation, but it is a bogus offer based on lies and deception. To illustrate, consider the possibility of a man traveling from Colorado to Canada who discovers that he is lost in the Rocky Mountains. He stops to

ask for directions and two men offer different routes. One man shows him a map and explains that a direct route is now impossible because the passes are closed due to heavy snow. But he points out from the map which roads must be taken to arrive safely at his destination. It will be a long and difficult trip, but if the traveler follows the directions carefully he will arrive where he wants to go.

The second man says, "No, that's doing it the hard way." He then proceeds to give verbal directions of a much quicker route. The traveler is lured into the second man's explanation by the appeal of less time involved even though no map was produced as evidence of truthfulness. The fact is, this new and quick way to Canada was wrong. Yet, the traveler chooses and embarks upon the quick and easy route rather than the confirmed route. He sincerely wants to go to Canada, but he is on the wrong road. He has accepted a falsehood as if it were the truth. The evidence was there, but he shunned the evidence because the directions "sounded" so right.

The illustration clearly shows that in contrast to the many "churchgoers" of today, the genuine disciple is seeking truth rather than some comfortable religion. He knows truth is to be found in the Lord's word. To deviate from this will put him on the wrong road, so he remains within the limits of this word. In so doing, he will reap a relationship with truth.

3. True disciples are free.

...and the truth will set you free.

Freedom is the natural consequence of a relationship with truth. This is freedom in its genuine sense... enslaved to no one.

If a man twists Scripture in order to be loyal to his denomination, he is enslaved to that denomination. If a man distorts Scripture in order to justify sin, he is enslaved to sin. Such men are not listening to the word of Jesus, rather they adhere to the dictates of someone or something else.

But truth sets us free. The true disciple is not shackled to a religious tradition. He wants only to be right with his Lord. He is free from all men. He listens only to the Lord.

Being freed from sin, the true disciple does not try to hold on to it, nor to justify the presence of it in his life. He is dead to his former relationship with it (Romans 6). One

cannot be listening to the beckoning voice of sin and abiding in the word of Jesus at the same time. In his new relationship with truth, the genuine disciple is enabled to see through the deceptions and lies of sin. A man who possesses truth cannot be deceived by lies.

True disciples are free from fear, legalism, prejudice, tradition, and a thousand other human elements that tend to enslave us. Genuine disciples of Jesus stand out in the crowd of religious confusion. They are never content to play the modern role of being just another "church member." They march to the beat of a different drum, and like Jesus, they cannot be touched by the intimidations of the earthly realm. They refuse to conform to the world's standards because they are free spirits, listening only to the voice of their Lord.

It was this mention of being free that caught the ear of these new believers. With knee-jerk reaction, they considered Jesus to be mistaken if He thought they were in need of freedom. After all, they were tight with God because of Abraham and as the "chosen," they could never be enslaved. The subsequent discussion in John 8 reveals the true loyalty of these "who came to believe."

Conclusion

Being a disciple is more than just accepting Jesus... it is more than being baptized and joining some church. Discipleship carries a price tag... it will cost you something... it will cost you everything.

Some within the present generation will only climb to the level of these who came to believe at the temple in Jerusalem. So many modern "believers" have only accepted intellectually a few things from the teaching of Jesus, but are unwilling to pay the price to remain in His word. These consider all biblical statements to be negotiable. Whenever Jesus' word teaches something with which they disagree, they follow their own inclinations, justifying their actions on the basis of freedom of interpretation. Unwilling to pay the price for truth, these never really come to know truth and are unable to break the shackles of their slavery. One who thinks he has truth while still clutching a lie is chained to his own destruction.