

# Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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## Who Are We? Disciples and Saints Called Out For God's Purposes

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"Going-about, therefore, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..." Matthew 28:19,20

"And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.'" Mark 8:34

"...upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it..." Matthew 16:18

"...to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called saints..." Rom. 1:7

"...I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul." I Peter 2:11

**What does it mean to be a Christian?** Sometimes we *think* we know something, but we really only have a general idea. Our understanding may not be clear and accurate, at all. In the matter of what it means to be a Christian, this lack of crisp definition has been passed down from generation to generation, and all kinds of traditions and misperceptions have muddled the waters even more. It would be beneficial to go back to the NT to see some of the key ideas used by Jesus and the apostles to define what it meant to be a Christ-follower in those early days.

Without question, **the most common and strongest word picture utilized in the NT for this is *disciple*.** This word, in its various forms is used 270 times in the NT. (76 times in Matthew, 46 times in Mark, 38 times in Luke, 79 times in John, and 31 times in Acts) Nine times this word is used to refer to the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:14; 11:12; Lk. 5:33; 7:18,19; 11:2; Jn. 1:35,37; 3:25), in Lk. 5:33 it refers to the followers of the Pharisees. They, in turn, thought of themselves as "disciples of Moses" (Jn. 9:28). All of the remaining 259 occurrences of this word are used to refer to followers of Jesus. **What is a "disciple"? This word means an "active follower".** It was more than simply a student. **It implied more than just intellectual learning. It implied *action*.** The crowds were called "disciples" because they left the comfort of their homes and daily life to go where Jesus was, listen to His teachings, and see what He would do. *A disciple actually followed in order to observe and imitate his or her instructor. This was more a learning by example, practice and implementation.* **This was not just learning ideas, or doctrine. It was learning to do what the leader did.** It is not surprising, then, that Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Lk. 6:40). Thus, **a disciple invested in learning what the Master thought, taught, said and did.** Jesus said, "If you continue in (lit., 'abide in') My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine" (Jn. 8:31). **A disciple repeatedly studies and meditates on the Master's teaching and example** to gain new insights in order to *think like* and *act like* the Master. Jesus gave us the charge to "make disciples of all nations". As He broke down what that entailed, He concluded, "teaching them to observe all that I said" (Matt. 28:20). Clearly, **He is expecting that we will change the way we live so that we will learn to do His will, and represent Him clearly to the world around us.** Again, the goal for disciples is to become like their Master, in thought, word and deed.

If this was not a strong enough indication of what it means to be a Christian, **the next most common word picture used is to *follow*.** Forms of this word occur 73 times in the gospels for those who would be Christ's. On twenty occasions, Jesus actually directly calls someone to follow Him, or says that it is necessary to follow Him (Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21; Mk. 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Lk. 5:27; 9:23,59,61; 18:22; Jn. 1:43; 10:27; 12:26; 21:19,22), and in case we missed what He meant, on three of those occasions He also used the phrase "come after Me" to describe discipleship (Matt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23). **The word for "follow" literally means to "walk the same road" with someone.** It could refer to either walking behind someone else, which was the customary walking arrangement between a rabbi and his students, and seems to be what Jesus indicates by using the phrase "come after Me", or it could refer to people walking together on the same path. In either case, they must be in agreement to stay together (Amos 3:3). Divergent thoughts and choices will quickly bring us down a diverging path. **In the case of our relationship to Jesus, to "follow" is another way of indicating that we need to learn His ways, and to choose to do His will.** Paul indicates that Timothy was faithful in "following" the "words of the faith and of the good teaching" which he had taught (I Tim. 4:6; II Tim. 3:10). Peter says that Jesus "left behind an example for us to follow in His footsteps" (I Pet. 2:21). Clearly, we are not just to learn *about* Jesus, we are learn to *walk like* Jesus, ...the same thing the apostle John says in I Jn. 2:6.

If you still are having difficulty with what it means to be a Christian, Paul expresses this even more clearly. He uses forms of a Greek word meaning to "imitate". **An imitator is one who copies the example of someone else.** The obvious emphasis is on behavior. It is not just holding to some belief. It has to do with following what someone

else has done before. In Ephesians 5:1, we are called to be “imitators of God, as beloved children”. Twice in the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorted them to “become imitators of me” (4:16; 11:1). How can Paul put himself up as a role model? There is a qualifying phrase in 11:1, “Be imitators of me, *according as I imitate Christ.*” **In so far as Paul faithfully imitated Jesus, he was a healthy role model for the Corinthians.** He was also such a role model to the Thessalonian church. They became imitators of him, “by receiving the word of God in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:1). **They learned from Paul’s example, so that when they found themselves in circumstances similar to what he had been through, they knew how to handle them.** This same truth is expanded in 2:14 to include the example of the church in Jerusalem. The Thessalonians became imitators of them, when they experienced trials like those Judean Christians had endured. In a final example, the author to the book of Hebrews wrote, “...we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but **be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises**” (6:11,12). This is just another way of telling someone to be an active follower, a disciple. To imitate someone really emphasizes choosing to handle things like they did. **To imitate, you have to carefully observe and study that other person, and learn to do what they do. That sounds like being a disciple, doesn’t it?**

**There are a couple of other words that are important to understand what it means to be a Christian.**

**The first is the word “church”.** The Greek word “*ekklēsia*” refers to people who are “called out from” everyday life to meet together for a purpose. It is interesting that the word “disciple” was used primarily in the gospels and Acts. It is never used in any of the remainder of the NT. The word, *ekklēsia*, occurs only three times in the gospels, 23 times in the book of Acts, and 51 times in the remainder of the NT. **There seems to be a shift in the emphasis between the gospels and the remaining parts of the NT. The gospels emphasize the call to become disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, imitators of those who are following. The remainder of the NT seems to be addressing those who have responded to this call. They are the “called out ones”, ...the ones who heard and responded to the call to follow, the call to walk “the Jesus road”, the call to meet to support one another and help one another in this endeavor. While being a disciple is primarily an individual choice and endeavor, the *ekklēsia* is a corporate or group function. To be a Christian is supposed to include both dimensions.** Can you be an effective disciple without being part of the *ekklēsia*? Not really, ...at least not for long. *He* leads His followers to the group dynamic for discipleship. He is the one who “calls us out”. **How can you say you are following Jesus, if you are not heeding His call to meet with others to build them up? The church is His idea. It is His strategy.** If we are in Christ, we *are* already members of His body, the church. **If we grow up into Christ, He will direct us to serve and support other members of His body.** He has designed things to work that way. Now, let me hasten to say that not everything that purports to be “the church” is actually functioning well as the body of Christ. Many times Christ calls His people out to meet to build one another up, but they never get around to doing what He intends for them to do. In fact, *the manner in which most Christians meet today discourages the interaction that God intended for them to experience.* This does not change our identity, however. We *are* the “called out ones”. We are called out from the world, and called to attend to God’s business.

**Another key word that is descriptive of God’s desire for what Christians are is the word “saint”.** The word, “saint” means “one set apart; holy”. We are set apart from what is common, and set apart for God’s purposes. Again, this fits well with the idea choosing to follow Jesus, living to become like Him, and being called out from everyday life. **The emphasis of this word, “saint”, is that we are “dedicated to God”.** This word occurs only once in the gospels (Matt. 27:52), four times in the book of Acts (9:13,32,41; 26:10), and 56 other times in the rest of the NT. Again, the word itself is used to remind us of our calling. **We are called to be holy. In fact, the process of becoming more and more holy is the word “sanctification”, which is from the same root word as “saint”.** Just like we are disciples the moment we choose to follow Jesus, and we grow to become more and more like Him as we follow Him, in the same way **we start out as “saints”, ones set-apart for God, and we become more and more clean, righteous and holy as we pursue Him.** As God says, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance,<sup>15</sup> but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior;<sup>16</sup> because it is written, ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

**This leads us to one final word picture. In I Peter 1:1 and 2:11, Peter addresses us as “aliens”.** He is not talking about science fiction. **He is emphasizing that our citizenship is no longer here. Our citizenship is now in heaven.** We don’t really belong here, anymore. We have *heard the call* of discipleship, and *have responded to the challenge* to pursue Christ and live for Him. In doing this, *we joined the ranks of the “called out ones”* and became set apart to God. **We cannot in good conscience continue to live for this present evil age. We belong to another kingdom, a heavenly one. We are exiles here.** The earthly values and dreams have lost their luster. Instead, we choose to live for eternal values. **We embrace the notion that we are set apart for God, and pursue our new focus.**